



There's Something About Dragons (How I Met My Monster)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Falling for a dragon once was a mistake. Giving him a second chance? That's just asking to get burned.

Here's the thing about dating dragons: don't. Especially if you're me. My first dragon boyfriend, Zed? Gorgeous, charming and responsible for the worst night of my teenage life. The ones who came after? All ghosted me when they found their fated mates.

I learned my lesson: No more dragons. It never ends well.

Fast-forward fifteen years, and guess who strolls back into my life? Zed—older, hotter, and still single. He only wants one date, but he's overdue to find his mate. I should walk away before he disappears a second time. But there's still something about him that makes my carefully mended heart skip a beat.

Should I let myself fall for the dragon who destroyed it...and risk getting burned (again)?

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Cari

Fifteen years ago

“ You better get rid of that critter. He’s going to be nothing but trouble.” I can’t see my dad, but I can hear his beer can crack open through the thin walls of our rental house in Apple Grove, Oregon. We move around so much that it doesn’t quite feel like home yet.

I hug Radar close to my chest, and his puppy legs paddle against my sunshine-yellow T-shirt. “He’s not trouble. I’ll take care of him.”

“I’m not paying for dog food,” Dad grumbles as the TV pops on and the sounds of Sunday night football begin to blare. Triumph wells in my chest. He isn’t putting his foot down. “And he can’t come in the house,” he hollers over the broadcast like an afterthought.

Whatever. I barely register his voice as I head outside. I’m keeping the puppy in my room even if I have to sneak him in through the window. At the end of this school year, I’ll graduate, and then Radar and I can move out and go to college together.

My heart gives a thump at the lie. No way I’ll be able to afford college on my own, and Dad sure isn’t paying. But Radar and I will figure it out. Even if I have to work a fast-food job and save up for years, I’m going to college and then to vet school.

I trace the polka-dot markings on the puppy’s back and tickle his floppy ears. I think he might be a dachshund mix. So cute. “Isn’t that right, buddy? We’re going to be a

team.”

He gives a yip and wiggles his paws even more furiously, like he’s galloping through the air. Laughing, I set him down in the front yard so he can get his zoomies out. He does a few clumsy doughnuts in the grass before running head-first into the side of a terracotta planter.

It tips over and smashes onto the concrete path, spilling dirt and petunias everywhere.

“Caroline!”

I scoop up Radar and run around the side of the house where our property meets the forested area on the edge of town. I’ve been warned plenty of times to stay out of the woods, both by my dad and by the signs posted every ten feet along our fence.

MONSTER RESERVE – HUMANS KEEP OUT

There’s a reason our rent is so cheap. It isn’t safe to enter the stretch of land in the Cascade foothills where the monsters, restricted to their more humanoid forms inside city limits, are allowed to shift and hunt.

But right now, meeting a monster sounds preferable to facing my father, and there’s nowhere else to hide. Tucking a wriggling Radar under my arm, I squeeze through the barbed-wire fence.

I’ll only go into the woods a little way, just beyond the first layer of trees and shrubs so I’m not visible from the yard. Knowing my dad, he needs time to cool down. I’ll clean up the mess on the front walk while he’s passed out. Replace the planter out of my savings. It’ll be fine.

“CAROLINE!” His roar is closer now. “You better be gone, girl! You don’t want me

to find you or that mutt.”

Crouching down behind a fallen tree, I hold my breath and let Radar chew on my hand so he doesn't bark, grimacing as his teeth dig into my skin. The screen door eventually bangs, signaling that Dad has given up and gone back to his game, and I can finally breathe again.

“Good boy,” I murmur, just as the puppy chomps his needle teeth into the soft meat between my thumb and forefinger. I let him go on instinct, and the second his feet find the ground, he takes off, heading deeper into the underbrush.

“Radar, no!” I hiss as loudly as I dare. “Come back!”

His tail waves like a white flag in the darkening forest. I do my best to follow him, blackberry vines snagging my ankles and branches slapping my face, but my glimpses of him get smaller and smaller.

It's easier for him to move through the undergrowth because he's so little, and somehow, despite the fact that his cloudy eyes can't see a thing, he's avoiding all the trees and other obstacles that seem to trip me every five feet.

And then he disappears into the settling dusk.

No little tail wagging. No joyful yips and yaps. No crunchy leaves under tiny paws. I'm alone in the woods.

The birds have stopped singing, too.

I should go back. That's the smart thing to do. But I can't leave a blind puppy out here at night. He could fall in a hole and get stuck...or worse, run into something with sharper teeth than he has.

I can't think about that.

"Radar!" I call, louder this time. He probably doesn't know his name yet. It hasn't been twenty-four hours since I dragged him out from underneath the porch. "Here, boy! Come on out!"

I wish I knew which way he's gone. I feel as lost as he is, and to be honest, even with 20/20 vision I can't see much now that it's getting darker. That doesn't stop me from pushing further into the forest, calling for him.

My calls might reach a monster first, but they speak the same language I do. If one shows up, I'll just explain that I lost my dog. Maybe they'll even help me look for him.

There's a wolfgirl in my AP Calc class, and she's nice. She has to use a special grip to hold her pencil, but everything else about her is basically just like a human teenager. She plays softball and worries about finals and wears a hoodie with our school mascot, the Fighting Fox, on the back, the pointed ears on the hood fitting perfectly over her wolfy ones.

The thought that I've never seen her fully shifted nibbles at the back of my mind. Does she have the same personality in full monster form? Or is she something different... something deadlier?

Goosebumps raise on my arms, but I scrub them away and keep walking. It's going to be fine.

Up ahead, I hear the murmur of voices and then...a high, delighted bark! That has to be Radar. Someone found him...or he found someone. Either way, I'm so relieved, tears well in my eyes.

“He’s pretty cute,” one voice rumbles. I can hear a smile in the deep, friendly tone.

The other one snorts. “Domesticated. Probably tastes like chicken.”

I break into a jog. “Hey! Please don’t eat him. That’s my dog!” I call.

The voices abruptly cut off, replaced by footsteps and grunts and rustling and a muffled curse that’s very nearby.

“I’m serious. Give me my dog.” Where did they go? I stop, heart pounding, to listen. The sounds are coming from behind a large boulder to my left. “He’s just a puppy. Please, don’t hurt him.”

“I wouldn’t.” The deep, rumble voice sounds irritated and...a little embarrassed? “Gabe was joking. We don’t eat dogs. I just...need a minute. Then I’ll bring the little guy to you.”

“Okay.” My heart’s racing, but what can I do? I wait.

Long minutes later, a huge, shadowy figure with glowing yellow eyes and red skin steps from behind the boulder. He must be seven feet tall. Horns sprout from his head and a thick tail with a pointed tip snaps behind him. It’s a dragon . And this is his less-scary form.

Instinctively, I take a step back and trip over something. I would have landed ungracefully on my ass, but someone catches my arm, stopping my fall. The dragon looms over me, Radar cradled in one arm.

“Sorry,” he says, like he’s the one who pushed me down. “I’m still slow at shifting. Took me a sec to change form and get dressed while I was holding onto the dog.” He motions to his outfit. He’s wearing a very human jeans and a T-shirt that must have

been hard to put on with one hand. In the dim light, I can barely make out the logo. It's an axe, the mascot from another high school, South Lincoln. The all-monster school.

Something in me settles. He's a student, just like me. He extends his free arm, offering to help me up.

I take his clawed, scaly hand. It completely dwarfs mine. His skin is much warmer, too, almost hot. He pulls me upright, his bicep stretching his sleeve with the effort. He squeezes my fingers slightly before he drops them, like he's reassuring me everything's going to be fine. For some reason, I believe it.

I clear the catch in my throat. "Thanks for finding him. Radar ran off like a rocket, and I couldn't keep up."

"Radar, huh?" he asks, looking down at my puppy, who's draped over his muscular forearm with his tongue hanging out. Is mine hanging out, too? Feels like it. Forearms are my weakness.

I nod, and he passes the dog to me. Exhausted from his adventures, Radar immediately snuggles into the crook of my elbow. "I call him that because he can't see. He has to navigate using his other senses. So...Radar."

"Cute name. I'm Zed, by the way."

"Caroline. Well, Cari," I correct, stroking Radar's soft fur. It feels so good to have him back in my arms, I can't stay mad at him. "I live on the edge of the woods. We moved in last month."

Something comes over Zed's face, but it's hard to read exactly because even in his humanoid form, his features are so inhuman. "Oh. You're that Caroline."

My heart sinks. He must have heard my dad yelling at me before. I paste on a big, brave smile. “Guess I’m famous around here.”

“Just to me and Gabe because we hunt in this quadrant so often. He’s hiding because he’s shy meeting new people. Sasquatch thing,” Zed explains awkwardly.

“Hi Gabe,” I say to the seemingly empty woods. “Nice to ‘meet’ you, too.”

Zed grins when I use one of the puppy’s paws to wave into the trees, but his smile quickly slips away. “We’ve been worried about you. Probably sounds strange since we haven’t met, but more than once I’ve thought about tracking you down. Saying something. Is that your husband?”

I laugh. “I’m only eighteen. Not married. You probably heard my dad. He’s got a little bit of a temper.”

Zed growls softly. “He shouldn’t treat you like that.”

I shake my head and hug Radar to my chest. Dad blows up, but he’s never hit me or anything. “I’m fine.”

“Let me walk you home, at least.” He raises one brow, his half-smile exposing a row of pointed teeth that glint in the dusk. They’d be intimidating except one of his fangs is slightly crooked, giving him an endearing snaggletooth. His pupils flicker almost like they have flames burning inside them. Maybe they do, now that I think about it.

“Can you breathe fire?” I blurt out as we head back toward my yard. I hope it’s not too personal of a question.

He chuckles under his breath. “Yeah, but I can’t show you.”

“Why not?”

“Fire danger.” He scuffs some of the dry pine needles and leaves that litter the forest floor. “Not allowed when it’s this high.”

So they can’t breathe fire when they want. Can’t shift around humans. Can’t hunt except in designated areas. I don’t like that he can’t be himself and do what comes naturally to him. “You have a lot of rules to follow.”

Another charming, crooked grin. “Safety first!”

I frown at his flippant response. “But the rules are for our safety, not yours. That’s not very fair. It’s more like a punishment when you haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Better than the alternative, isn’t it?” he says lightly, holding a branch to one side for me. “We monsters can’t go around setting the world on fire.”

“You wouldn’t.” Funny thing is, it feels like he already has. My palm’s still warm from when he held my hand. Tingles zip through me, making my heart pound and my cheeks heat up. He’s not like anyone I’ve ever met.

We reach the fence, and he pulls apart the wire for me to step through. It’s truly dark now, the only light coming from the rising moon, the windows of the house behind me, and Zed’s mesmerizing, flame-lit eyes.

I pause on the other side of the fence, sharp wire cutting between us. I don’t want to go inside yet. I want to make sure I see him again. “When it rains, will you show me?”

“Yeah,” he says roughly. “Any time you want.”

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Zed

Fifteen years ago

“Come on, dude.” Gabe elbows me in the ribs. “It’s getting late. Tomorrow’s a school day.”

I shrug him off, all my attention focused on the house on the other side of the fence. It’s late, but the lights are on in the second-floor bedrooms, so I know Cari is still awake. Her curtains are shut, but her silhouette sometimes passes by the window. “Go home, then. I just want to make sure her dad’s not going to blow up again.”

“What if he does? What are you going to do? Shift and get the cops called on you? Don’t be dumb.”

He’s right. I can feel my feral form pushing from the inside every time I think about how Cari’s dad yells her name. The way he spits it out like it tastes bad. I have to stop thinking about it, or I won’t be able to keep it inside.

I’m the worst in my class at shifting. Poor grades in control, completion, speed. I could definitely get myself in trouble if I let my emotions run high over this girl I just met.

“I need to know she’s safe. As soon as her light goes out, then I’ll head home,” I say stubbornly. I don’t know why I’m so stuck on this. Maybe it’s her wide, blue eyes or the way she’s selflessly devoted to her puppy or the scent of her cucumber shampoo, but there’s something about her that brings out my protective instincts.

“Fine. Ruin your own life. But remember, she’s just another human. She doesn’t get monster stuff. If she knew you were out here watching her, she’d think you were a creep,” Gabe says over his shoulder as he melts into the trees.

He’s right, and I hate him a little bit for reminding me. She’s just a human, and humans are mostly trouble. They always assume the worst of us.

But Cari didn’t, I remind myself as I stare at her window.

Her innocent question— Do you breathe fire? —changed my view of her. It wasn’t the naïve question itself. It was her reaction to the answer.

Rather than taking it at face value and being glad that I’d keep my flames in check, she was upset that I didn’t have a choice about it. Upset for all dragons whose fire is suppressed even when they’d never cause anyone harm.

She’s different than other humans. Someone special.

Her bedroom light winks out. Time for me to head home.

But I don’t.

My mother lays into me when I get back to the hive to grab breakfast before school. “Where have you been? Just because you’re almost ready to fledge the nest doesn’t mean you can stay out all night without telling me where you are. I was so worried I almost took a flight over the forest until your father convinced me you were probably just running off some steam.”

“I know. Sorry, Mom.” I nuzzle her cheek apologetically, and she huffs, a puff of indignant smoke perfuming the air. I can’t tell her I was watching a human. She’d make sure I had hive chores for a month to keep me out of trouble.

“We’re roasting a boar tonight,” she continued. “You better be here to help.”

“Okay!” I stuff a couple hardboiled emu eggs down the hatch and grab some fruit to take with me. “See you after school!”

“At least polish your horns before you—you know what? Never mind. Your life, live it your way.” My mom sighs and waves me out the door.

The second I’m out of sight of the hive, I veer south, jogging along the bike path until I can cut through the woods toward Cari’s house. I just want to check on her. Make sure her bum of a dad isn’t yelling at her.

Don’t be a creep , Gabe’s voice echoes between my ears.

I’m not. I’ll watch her leave for school, and then I’ll go to mine.

But I don’t.

Sure, I watch her tie up her puppy in the yard and swing her light-blue backpack onto one shoulder. I see her climb into her dad’s pickup truck and put on lip gloss in the visor mirror as he pulls out. He doesn’t yell at her or anything. She’s fine.

But Radar isn’t. As soon as the truck is gone and her scent gets diluted in the morning breeze, he puts his pointy little nose in the air and starts crying for her. It’s the most heartbreaking sound I’ve ever heard. So I sneak through the fence and cuddle him for a while, sitting cross-legged by the house with my back up against the foundation until he stops howling.

“I know, buddy. I wish she was here, too. She’ll be back soon, though. You just have to be patient.” I pat him on the head and stand to go. Immediately, he whines the saddest little whine.

I sigh. I can't leave him like this. I'm already late for school by now, so what's another hour? I find a stick and play tug with him until he's tired and falls asleep on my lap. Every time I try and move him, he cries in his sleep.

Guess I'm stuck here until Cari gets home, chained to the doghouse just like Radar.

"What are you doing here?"

I wake up to her unforgettable blue eyes staring down at me. I must have fallen asleep with Radar. He's already awake and racing in circles around her ankles, winding the lead around her as he yips and jumps.

"Told you she'd be back, buddy." A yawn takes over my grin.

I push myself up to standing, and those blue eyes widen as they take in my full height. Cari takes a startled step back, and then another. The dog lead tightens around her ankles, hobbling her, and she tips sideways. Her arms windmill like a cartoon character as she starts to fall.

I catch her just before she hits the ground. It knocks the breath out of her, but she's fine. Radar's fine, too, still bouncing around. Cari stares up at me, her chest rising and falling, feeling so right in my arms.

"Wow. Second time in twenty-four hours you've been in the right place at the right time to save me."

"Lucky me." My feral form flexes and preens, begging to be let out. I can feel my muscles start to swell, testing the seams of my clothing. It wants to impress her, but I have a feeling she won't be impressed by the monster she just met yesterday stripping down in front of her. If she thinks I'm big now, she'd pass out if she saw my other form.

I carefully set her upright, avoiding eye contact as I kneel to untangle her feet from the lead. It's pulled so tight, I can't get it off over her sneakers. "Um, is it okay if I take off your shoes?"

"Sure!" she says, her cheeks flushed. "Sorry if they smell."

If they smell anything like the rest of her, I won't mind. I slip the light-blue Converse off her heels one at a time, guiding her bare feet through the loops of the leash to free them. Her feet are so small compared to mine. Like little treasures in my palm. I hate to let them go.

If I gave into my instincts, I'd take a deep breath to memorize their scent. And if she let me, I'd lick between her toes. But humans would definitely think that was weird.

Don't be a creep. Don't be a creep.

I relinquish her foot, hand her the sneakers, and stand up. "All done."

When I can finally bring myself to look at her face, she's biting her lip, flushed and embarrassed. Her tiny toes scrunch in the grass.

"You didn't answer my question," she reminds me. "Why are you here?"

"Oh, um. I was just walking by on my way to school," I fib. "I heard Radar crying, so I stopped to pet him and lost track of time." Hopefully she doesn't remember that South Lincoln High School is on the other side of town.

"Awww. That was sweet of you." She beams at me, still barefoot, and I drink up her approval. "I hate to leave him outside all day, but my dad won't let him stay in the house."

“No big deal.” I shrug. I’d skip school every day if she smiled at me like that. My mom would probably kill me, though. She’s might murder me for skipping one day, now that I think about it. “I have to go. My mom wants me to help roast a boar tonight, and if I don’t get home on time, I won’t be able to come save you tomorrow.” I laugh at my own joke, although I’m definitely not kidding.

Cari’s eyebrows rise. “A whole boar?”

I nod. “We take turns roasting it. We’re allowed to flame because it’s indoors in a special firepit.”

“Really? That’s so cool! Can I come watch, or is that weird?”

I grin at her. “Not weird. Just...most humans find it a little scary to hang out with fifty fire-breathing dragons.”

“I’m not scared,” she says, eyes shining with anticipation. But then, I already knew that Cari isn’t like most humans.

She and Radar come to the boar roast and have a great time. From that night forward, the two of them become regulars at hive feast days. We spend as much time together as we can in between school and sports and family obligations.

In October, Cari and Radar cheer at the finish line of my cross-country running meet. I get eighth place out of nine but feel like the grand champion.

In November, we build a bonfire at the beach for a bunch of our friends, after which Gabe admits that Cari is “all right for a human.”

In December, she bakes me Christmas cookies, which I eat even though the gluten in them screws up my flame for the next three weeks. In January, she sneaks into the

forest to stargaze in the snow with me, lying side-by-side on a wool blanket, our pinky fingers barely touching.

I leave her favorite flowers, sunflowers, on her front porch for Valentine's Day and watch from beyond the fence as she pretends she doesn't know who left them so her father doesn't get mad.

And in March, while we're studying in the public library after school, I work up the nerve to ask her to the South Lincoln Vernal Revel, the monster equivalent of human prom.

She pauses, finger on her place in a book, to glance up at me. "Of course."

I can't believe it. "Not as friends," I say, just to be sure. "I want a real date. A boyfriend-girlfriend date. No more meeting up in secret. I want everyone to know you're with me. Even your dad."

"Okay," Cari says. She slides the book back and the shelf and boosts up on tiptoe. "Prove it. Kiss me right here in the middle of the reference section."

"Uhh..." I grab the end of my tail so it will stop smacking nervously against the bookshelf behind me. Why didn't I read more about human cultural practices before I asked one out on a date? I guess I put Cari into a different category and forgot she has these quirks. "Right now?"

"Right now." She puckers her lips expectantly into a soft, pink bow.

"I'm not...I've never...I don't know how," I blurt out, cringing when a table of humans behind me starts snickering. "Our kind doesn't kiss."

"Never?!" Her mouth rounds into an O. I shake my head, mortified steam from my

nostrils fogging up my vision. She giggles when I wave it away. “Well, we are going to have to do something about that, aren’t we?”

The thought of Cari’s lips pressed against mine? My feral form roars to be let out. I’m barely hanging on by a thread. One more flirtation from her, and she’ll be faced with a side of me I’m sure she’s not ready to see.

“Next Saturday. I’ll pick you up,” I gasp, and dash for the door. I barely make it to the forest before my wings burst out of my back, horns and claws and teeth lengthening as my body expands, shredding my school clothes.

“How am I going to make it through a whole evening with her?” I ask Gabe later, after I’ve done a few circuits around the forest and managed to shift back. “I’m going to pop out a second dick if she tries to hold my hand.”

He hands me a pair of pants from his backpack, shaking his furry head as I tug them on. “Why are you trying to date a human, anyway? Seems like more trouble than it’s worth. Find a nice dragon girl, and she won’t care that you suck at shifting.”

I snort a laugh, then cough on my own smoke. “You don’t know dragon females.”

“Oh, so that’s why? Can’t date your own kind, so you’re going for easier prey?” Gabe sounds bitter. Maybe he’s had some bad luck with a Bigfoot gal or something.

“No. There’s just...something about her. I keep wondering if she might be my...” I don’t finish the sentence because it’s a crazy thought.

Alokoi, my less-logical feral form growls inside my head. It has no problem putting the label on her, human or not. Mate.

Gabe, whose species doesn’t have fated pairings, shrugs. “My advice? Rub one out

before you pick her up. Then you'll have post-nut clarity and see her for the waste of time she really is. Or at the very least, you'll be able to keep your dicks in your pants."

"What bug crawled up your butt?" I ask him, giving him a playful shove.

"Nothing, man. Just not looking forward to the Revel."

"Why not? Who are you bringing?"

"Not going. I'm just gonna watch." His mouth tugs down at the corners, exposing his lower canines.

"You like watching," I remind him. It always takes him time to warm up in social situations, but sometimes he feels comfortable enough to join in once he watches for a while.

He shrugs. "Depends on the view."

I slap him on the back. "Let's make it a good one, then. What should I wear?"

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Zed

Fifteen years ago

O n Saturday, I put on my rented, pale-blue tuxedo. It clashes with my red scales, but it's Cari's favorite color, so I hope she likes it.

I ignore Gabe's advice about jerking off, though. I don't need to nut to have clarity about Cari. She's it for me. I even tell my mom that I think she might be one.

"A human?" she says, frowning. "She's a nice girl. I've just never heard of a non-dragon alokoi. Plus, you're a late shifter like your father. There's nothing wrong with it, of course, but he didn't find me until well into his thirties. Are you sure she has that special smell?"

"I don't know! She smells good. Really good."

"A lot of humans use scented body products. You could ask her to skip them for a week to get more of her natural aroma, just to be sure. Or lick her between the legs to get her scent from the source. She probably won't mind." My mom titters.

Steam rises from my nostrils. She's so embarrassing sometimes. "I'm not asking her about her bathing habits! Or licking her anywhere! She'll run away screaming!"

"Oh, she might scream, but I doubt she'd run away." She smirks at me and then doubles over laughing when I glare back. "Come on now, Zedraak Glisson. You're a fully grown dragon. I'm allowed to tease you a little."

A growl is my only answer.

She pats me on the arm and straightens my pale-blue bowtie. “You look very fierce, darling. Be careful with your horns and everything will go well.”

But it doesn’t.

When I get to Cari’s house, corsage box clutched in my claws, her dad is waiting on the porch, arms crossed over his stained work shirt.

I clear my throat as I approach. “Good evening, Mr. Stark. I’m here to pick up Cari for the—”

“I don’t think so, Bubba,” he interrupts, stiff brown mustache bristling under his snub nose. Maybe I should have introduced myself first.

“Nice to finally meet you. My name’s Zed.” I hold out my free hand to shake like humans do when they greet each other, but he sneers at it. Did I misunderstand the custom?

“Your name’s Scram. Skedaddle. Shoo.”

“I thought it was Bubba,” I quip, my smart mouth getting the better of me.

His frown deepens. “I’ll have you know the cops are already on their way. Called ’em as soon as Caroline said a dragon was after her. Up to you whether they find you in one piece or several.”

“Dad! Stop!” Cari yelps from the doorway behind him. I can’t see her through his wide stance, but Radar bounds between her dad’s legs, down the steps, and leaps at me. I have no choice but to drop the corsage and catch him. “Zed’s not after me .

He's just taking me to a dance. I said he was coming over, not coming to get me."

Mr. Stark's eyes narrow as he looks at me again, taking in the ruined flowers on the ground and my tux...not to mention the dog he despises in my arms, who clearly knows me well. "He's after you one way or another. And either way, I don't like it."

"Don't be such a grump, Dad," Cari says, and nudges him aside. She takes one graceful step around him, and my brain liquifies.

Her curvy, petite frame is poured into a pale-blue dress that matches my suit. The thin straps holding it up look like they're made of spiderwebs. Like one wrong flick of a claw and the whole thing might fall off.

I feel faint.

My feral form does not. I can hear stitches popping.

"May I use your bathroom?" I gasp. Not that human bathrooms are a good size for shifting, but they're a good size for unzipping your rented tuxedo pants so your giant feral dicks don't tear through them like wet Kleenex.

"Of course, it's inside on the left..."

I push Radar into her arms as I pass her on my way into the house. Banging the door to the half-bathroom shut behind me, I slam the lock and unzip just in time. Two enormous erections spill out of my pants, already dripping pre-cum onto Cari's tile floor.

"Unnngh," I groan, leaning back against the door while I wait for them to deflate. Worst moment to half-shift ever. I should have followed Gabe's advice and yanked them before I got dressed for the Revel.

A tentative knock sounds. “Are you okay, Zed?” Cari’s soft, worried voice carries through the wooden panel. My dicks bob at the sound of my name on her lips.

“Fine! I’m fine!” I say, a little too cheerfully. “Just give me a minute.”

A minute stretches into five, and my dicks are still as fat and unruly as they were when I ran in here. I run the water so it sounds like I’m busy doing regular bathroom stuff.

Sirens wail, then cut out as tires crunch in the gravel driveway outside. Heavy knocking. A drawling exchange that I can’t quite make out. The cops are here. Damn it.

What is it that my shifting coach always says? Be firm with your feral form. He won’t listen if he doesn’t respect you.

“Get back inside,” I hiss at my dicks. “You are going to get us in such deep trouble.”

Voices. Then Cari’s gentle knock again. “Zed? Can you come out and meet the officer? It’s nothing serious. He just wants to make sure everything’s okay between you and me.”

“Uh...I’m not done.”

“What’s taking so long? What’s he doing in there?” her dad growls.

“Nothing!” I blurt out in a panic. “I mean, not nothing . I’m, uh, doing bathroom things. In the bathroom. Like normal.” Right. That sounded like a totally normal response. I’m sure he’s not suspicious at all.

“Dad, let him have some space. Come on. I’ll make some coffee for the cops while

they wait.” Their voices fade somewhat as they retreat toward the kitchen.

I try and stuff my dicks back into my pants. Maybe if I can just wedge one on each side, I can zip up...

Nope . And the stimulation—not to mention the images of Cari in that damn blue dress that keep popping into my head—makes them swell even bigger.

I bang the back of my head gently against the door. If the cops find me like this, it’s not just going to be bad for me. It’s going to be bad for my whole hive. It will prove that monsters can’t control themselves. That we need more rules and restrictions to keep humans safe.

My cocks don’t care. They just drool on the floor like a dog waiting for dinner.

Fine. I grip the shaft of one in each hand and start stroking, fast and hard. It doesn’t usually take long. Feels weird to think of Cari when she’s in the next room with her dad and a couple of police officers, though. Like I should ask her permission first. I try to think of something else. Anything else.

The issue of Dragon Dames my cousin gave me as a joke when I turned eighteen. The cute orc barista at the drive-through coffee hut who singlehandedly caused my caffeine addiction a few years back. Even the curvy back end of a Ferrari that resembles a female’s feral form! But none of them stick. Cari’s pale blue eyes and sweet smile cut the line every time.

I give in and let memories of her flood my senses. Sweat beading in her cleavage after chasing Radar around the yard. A damp strand of blonde hair sticking to her cheek. The way she bit her lip when I brushed it back.

The dick in my left hand goes off, splattering the side of the sink and dragging a

groan out of my chest. One more to go. Almost there. Almost there.

Cari jumping up and down at the finish line of my race, chest bouncing inside her sweater. Cari's small foot in my hand, toes wiggling against my palm—

Someone hammers on the door, jarring me out of my fantasy before I can coax my other cock to cooperate. "What's going on in there? It better not be what I think it is. Open this door in the next five seconds, or I'm coming in," Cari's dad yells, rattling the doorknob.

"No, wait, hang on!" Frantically, I shove my softening lower cock back into my pants and then the still-stiff one on top of it. Even with only one feral erection to accommodate, the tuxedo pants protest, straining to the limit.

This isn't going to work. But the scratchy sound of the lock being picked lights a fire under my tail. In one last desperate attempt, I tug the edges of my fly together and yank the zipper as hard as I can.

Piercing pain lances through me. My vision spots. My feral form roars inside me.

Oh, nope, it roars outside me. The bathroom door splinters as I fully shift. My enormous feral dragon takes out three of the bathroom walls, bringing down a rain of drywall and tile. Flames erupt from my chest, igniting the shower curtain.

So much for making a good impression on her dad. At least with all the smoke, he won't see that I came all over the side of the sink.

But the cops are yelling now in tinny human voices, waving their little weapons around. I have to get out of here. I don't fit through the front door. Should I kick down a wall or go through the roof? Why do I feel so dizzy?

Oh no , I think, when I look down and see the blood streaming down my leg, tatters of the human-sized, pale-blue pants stuck to my scales. I'm not going to get my tuxedo deposit back.

And then I pass out.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Cari

Present Day

These conversations are always hard. I cradle the twenty-two-year-old cat in my arms, stroking her matted, gray fur. Her eyes are hazy, but her rusty purr tells me that she's still in there.

"She's not in pain, so I think if we keep her thyroid under control, she'll have a good quality of life. It's just a matter of whether you can manage the infusions," I say gently to her owner, Tristan Vance. He and his ancient kitty, Imp, are frequent flyers at my vet clinic due to her age and multitude of conditions. This is the second time he's been in this week.

"I can do it," he says, all brash confidence. He flashes me a bright-white smile as he slips off his suit jacket and rolls up his shirt sleeves, exposing his muscular forearms. They flex as he picks up the carrier he brought her in. "I'll rearrange my schedule. It's no problem. If I have to travel for work, I'll hire a kitty nurse."

"No one would blame you if you decide that it's best to..." I swallow the lump in my throat. Maybe these conversations are difficult because my blind old dog, Radar is getting up there in years. Eventually, I'll have to make a call like this.

"I can do it." Tristan squares his broad shoulders optimistically. "With your help? She'll make it to thirty."

He holds open the carrier door, and I gently place her inside the plush interior that he

had customized for her medical needs. As a high-powered investor without a wife or kids, Tristan has a lot of disposable wealth to spoil his cat. Unlike most pet owners, cost is never an issue when he's deciding what care she should receive.

"Impy is a lucky, lucky girl to have you."

He latches the carrier door, his smile spreading. "I like to think I'm the lucky one."

"I wish more people were like you, Tristan." I pat his arm and open the exam-room door, stifling my yawn. It's been a long day, my feet hurt, and I squeezed in Tristan and Imp after closing because her situation is so delicate. "Cynthia will get you checked out at the front desk."

He hesitates in the doorway. "I hope this isn't too forward, but would you like to get a drink later? Last time I asked, it was the middle of kitten season so you were slammed, but I thought now might be a better time."

I cough to cover my surprise. I was pretty sure I'd made it clear last time that I wasn't interested. Someone as handsome as him probably isn't used to being turned down. "I'm sorry, Tristan. As a rule, I don't date the owners of my patients."

His face almost blurs as it cycles through a series of emotions, landing on his dazzling smile. "Oh, I meant as friends, of course. We have so much in common, it would be fun to spend time together outside of the clinic. I do a lot of work with animal charities that you might be interested in."

He knew just the right button to push. Charity work is my passion. I already spend my Saturdays doing free spay-and-neuter for local shelters, but I'd love to do more. But his interest in me is pretty transparent, and I know that any meet-up, especially over drinks, is just a date in disguise.

“That’s cool! Why don’t you email me more info about them, and I’ll take a look.” I usher him out and close the door behind him before he can come up with another reason.

I wait until his footsteps fade and the clinic-door bells let me know that he’s gone. It’s only then that I spot his expensive wool suit jacket draped over the back of one of the chairs in the exam room. I have to laugh. Oldest trick in the book.

I grab it and take it out to the front desk where Cynthia, the angel of my clinic operation, is restocking the waiting room with pamphlets and tissues. She straightens up when I put the jacket on her desk, her dyed-red bob swinging around her soft jawline.

“He forgot this,” I explain. “Can you text him so he can stop by in the morning to pick it up?”

Cynthia’s kind, lined face cracks. “I doubt he needs the reminder. I heard what he asked you. You should put the man out of his misery and let him take you on a date.”

Panic flares in my belly, but I push it down. “You know I don’t date clients.”

Or anyone. Haven’t dated for years. Not since vet school when I started receiving the messages with fuzzy photos taken of me from afar. Voice mails promising that “we’ll be together soon.” I blocked the senders, but then weird packages showed up in the mail instead. Locks of hair. Maps with coordinates marked in remote areas of the Cascade Mountains.

I went to the cops. The police said the stalking was probably due to my social media presence. My dog blog about Radar, with over a million followers, paid my vet school tuition, but it also meant I got a lot of attention, some of it unwanted.

I did everything right to make the stalker go away. Changed phone numbers, made a new email account. Paid an assistant to screen my mail. Scrubbed my face from my socials so my posts only showed Radar. Stopped looking at DMs. It worked for a while.

But then the gestures escalated to gifts on my doorstep. Not regular gifts, strange ones. Broken sticks. Stacked rocks. Bundles of wildflowers and grass. Stuff the cops didn't take seriously.

So I moved. But it only took the stalker a few weeks to find me again, and the little gifts didn't stop until I graduated, changed my last name, and moved out of state.

Sometimes I still can't shake that feeling that someone's following me. Watching me. And I can't tell if the nice guy at the bookstore who buys my coffee or the pet-parent in my clinic who asks me out are just my stalker getting close again.

"I understand, honey," Cynthia says kindly. She knows my history. Everyone who works at the clinic does, just in case. "We can't live in the past forever, though. Don't let those wounds keep you from having a good life. You deserve someone amazing like Tristan. Even if it's not him, love is out there for you."

She hugs me, and my eyes well. I'm so lucky to have sweet, supportive friends like her. "You're right. You're right. I'll be more open-minded."

She nudges the jacket on her desk, a twinkle in her eye. "You sure you don't want to hang onto this so you can give it back to him in person?"

I laugh. "I'm positive. I wasn't lying when I turned him down. I really do have a policy against dating clients."

Plus... I've never admitted it to anyone, but I'm not really attracted to human men.

Not even stunningly handsome ones like Tristan. Maybe it's because my first love, Zed, the one that got away, was a dragon. It's like I imprinted on him, and since then I compare every guy I meet to him.

They never measure up. Even if they adore Radar like he did. Even if they're as sweet and funny and considerate and charming as he was.

They don't have eyes that glow when they look at me. They don't have gleaming horns that curve away from their forehead or stunning red scales or prehensile tails that brush my ankles when we walk in the forest. And when we make it to the bedroom, they definitely don't have two delicious-looking dicks between their legs.

Not that I ever got to taste his. One of my biggest regrets in life.

"You're blushing," Cynthia observes. I cover my cheeks with my hands, and she giggles girlishly, despite the fact that she's uncomfortably close to retirement age. "Well, whoever you're thinking about, maybe let him take you on a date."

I nod and rush back to my office before I get even more emotional. I never got a date with Zed. I spent six months waiting for him to ask me out, and when he finally did, everything went wrong. He was so injured during his shift that he ended up in the hospital for weeks. I wasn't allowed to visit him, and my get-well-soon cards went unanswered.

While Zed was recovering, my dad bullied his hive into paying for the home repairs in exchange for dropping the unauthorized shifting charges against him. Then, rather than fixing the house or turning the check over to the landlord, he used the money to move us to another town. No wonder Zed never contacted me again.

Not that I contacted him, either. I just sat there and hoped he'd find me. Every time I posted a photo or video of Radar on the internet, a little part of me hoped he'd see it

and comment. That's why I've kept the account going even though I don't need the income anymore.

Maybe that's part of my problem. Not only am I living in the past, I've been too passive. I wouldn't have to worry that a guy is a stalker if I asked him out.

Radar lifts his head from his napping spot in the corner of my office, nostrils flaring, when I enter. He whines a yawn and staggers to his feet, waiting for me to clip on his harness. He may be an old dog, but he still loves his evening walk through the park on the way home.

"Just give me an extra sec, buddy." I sit down at my desk and open my laptop. The profile picture of our @SeeRadarRun account stares back at me with a closeup of Radar's cute, cloudy eyes. I ignore the blinking notifications tab that always makes me panic a little and instead scroll through the grid of photos and videos I've shot over the last decade. "We've had a good run, haven't we?"

It's almost like Radar knows what's going on, the way he plops down on the ground next to me and wags his little tail.

I take a deep breath and write what's in my heart.

Goodbye and Thank You from Radar & Me ??

For over a decade, you've watched Radar navigate life's little challenges, celebrated his milestones, and shared in his endless joy. Along the way, millions of you helped me follow my dream of becoming a veterinarian. Your views, likes, comments, and shares funded my education, and I'll never be able to thank you enough for giving me that opportunity.

Radar has taught me more than I could ever express—about resilience, unconditional

love, and the beauty of difference. Through him, I've learned that every challenge can be met with creativity and compassion. I hope that by sharing his story, we've helped others understand that disabilities don't define the worth of a life.

To each of you who followed us, commented, shared advice, and encouraged me through the years: thank you from the bottom of my heart. You've not only changed my life, but you've shown the world how amazing a dog like Radar can be. So many special-needs pets have found homes because of you.

While today marks the end of this chapter, I hope you'll carry Radar's lessons of love and perseverance with you, too. Thank you for being a part of our journey.

???? Cari & Radar

I upload it with a single pawprint image and turn off comments.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Zed

Present Day

My heart drops when I see Cari's most recent post. The pawprint picture. The broken heart emoji. My feral form, whom I've made friends with in the fifteen years since I last saw Radar, roars his grief deep in my chest.

"Dude. I think her dog died." My voice rasps with emotion.

"What? Whose dog?" Gabe spins around in his office chair to face me, brushing a swoop of his floppy hair out of his eyes.

"Cari's. She just posted a goodbye message. Why else would she close her account?"

He shakes his shaggy head, lip curled disapprovingly. "Why are you even looking at her page, bro? You have got to stop stalking her. It's weird."

"I'm not stalking, I'm looking. It's a public account."

A growl slips out of him. "Give up, already. She doesn't care about you. Anyway, you should be working on the new UI, not scrolling the socials of all the females you knew in high school." Gabe spins around again and the sound of his keyboard clicks resume. Our company logo, a cloud with a happy face, stares at me from the back of his T-shirt.

I should listen to him. Even though our startup has taken off in recent years, we are

still the only two full-time employees. He handles the back end, I do all the product side. Our division of labor works perfectly. He doesn't have to talk to anyone except me, which he prefers, and I get to do all the fun stuff like dreaming up new ideas and going to conferences to pitch our products. We're an amazing team, but if one of us slacks off, the business can't run, so I need to focus.

I take a deep breath and work on composing my feedback the designer we contracted for the app's user interface. She did a great job. A few tweaks to the color palette to better match our branding and some adjustment on the main menu, and it'll be perfect.

"Less aqua, more sky blue," I type. I add a few more notes and finally send it off, but it takes me twice as long as it should because my mind keeps slipping back to Cari's post.

She must be devastated. Radar is everything to her.

"I should send her a card," I muse out loud.

"The UI designer?" Gabe asks absentmindedly.

"No, Cari! I just can't believe it. Radar seemed totally healthy last week when she posted all those videos of him running around on the beach. Tail wagging, ears flapping, tongue hanging out. How do you go from that to gone in seven days? Major whiplash. How is she even processing it?"

Gabe's typing pauses. "Can we discuss your parasocial obsessions after five p.m., or should we take lunch so we can have this talk off the clock?"

"It's too early for lunch. Not even ten," I point out.

“And yet we’ve already had two conversations about a vague social media post from a human who probably doesn’t remember your name.”

I snort, and a little steam escapes my nostrils. “I Hulk-smashed her half-bath. I’m pretty sure she remembers me.”

He scoffs, drumming his fingers on the edge of the desk impatiently. “You keep making my point for me. Not trying to be cruel, but she doesn’t want to hear from you, Zed. You’ve spent way too long drooling over this girl, and she isn’t interested.”

My feral form flexes, offering to kill him for us. But my current form, the more logical, reasonable one who knows his best friend is right about this, too, just wants to cry. I’m in love with a memory of an eighteen-year-old girl. She’s thirty-three now. Probably a completely different person. After all this time, why can’t I let her go?

Mate , growls my feral form. It’s pretty much the only word he knows, though.

“I think she could be my alokoi,” I admit. Gabe has been around dragons enough to understand the significance, even if his kind don’t have fated mates. “I didn’t take the possibility too seriously back then because I didn’t know anybody with a human mate. But since then, four or five dragons have mated with humans, so it happens. Think about it. I haven’t identified anyone else, and I’m over thirty. That’s super rare.”

“Or maybe you’re just a super loser?” Gabe snickers. I punch him in the shoulder, and he clutches it, pretending to be injured until we both stop laughing. “Seriously, though. You’re so hung up on her, you might have overlooked someone else. You come in every day obsessing over the details of her posts. I feel like I’m stalking her, I know so much about this chick. It’s all I hear about from you. Please, get a different hobby.”

“Okay, sorry. I’ll shut up about it,” I croak, embarrassed.

But before I get back to the next item on my to-do list, I click over to the tab with the @SeeRadarRun account and reload to see if Cari’s posted an update. She hasn’t. And when I try and leave my condolences on the post, I notice comments are turned off.

I click the private message button, and the chat screen pops up. My last message to her, sent seven years ago, is still unread. If I give her my condolences here, she’s never going to see it.

I close my laptop with new intention. “I’m sending a card.”

“Zed! Stop!” Gabe throws up his hands in frustration at yet another interruption, spinning to face me again. He runs his hands through his long facial hair. “Listen. You sound nuts right now. You don’t even know her address.”

Not for lack of trying. Gabe’s heard me complain plenty of times over the years that Cari’s not listed anywhere. “I’ll hire someone to find it. A private eye.”

His eyes widen and bushy brows lift. “Are you being serious right now? You’re going to pay someone to stalk her for you?”

I nod. “This is...I don’t know. Radar was my last connection to her. I’m not trying to get back in her life. I just want her to know how sorry I am...about everything. Maybe that’s the closure I need to finally move on.”

Gabe levels me with a serious look. “So you’re not going to bug her. You’re just going to send your condolences and apologies, and if she doesn’t respond, that’s that? You’ll lose her address, never talk to her again?”

“Yeah. I guess.” My stomach twists at the thought, but what choice do I have?

He nods. “Okay. Then I’ll find her for you.”

My eyes bug out at the offer, and I suck in a breath. “You can do that?!”

He wiggles his fingers. “I have my ways. But if anyone asks, it didn’t come from me.”

While he taps his keyboard and clicks through windows, I push up from my office chair and pace back and forth in the small office, tail flicking and every muscle tense with anticipation. I’m going to learn her address. I’m going to learn where she lives .

Gabe spins around in his chair. “Done.”

My phone buzzes with a notification. Swallowing hard, I open a message from Gabe. Caroline Stanley. Address in San Drogo, California. A beach town. I knew it.

“Married name?” I ask, voicing a fear I hadn’t yet acknowledged.

Gabe pauses, then gives a slow nod. “Sorry, man. Married with kids.”

She’s married. In love with someone else. Carried his children. My chest tightens, squeezing my heart harder and harder until I force myself to breathe. “It’s okay. It’s okay. Doesn’t change anything. Thanks. Appreciate it.”

“No problem.” He spins back around, resumes working.

I try, but for the rest of the day, I just compose stupid letters in my head.

Dear Cari, So sorry to hear about Radar’s passing...

Dear Cari, I wanted to say how sorry I am for everything...

Dear Cari, I'm a sorry excuse for a dragon who didn't contact you until it was too late to do anything about my fifteen years of unrequited feelings...

That night at the hive, it's like I'm in a fever to get it all out on paper. Writing and rewriting, crossing out. Pacing around and talking to myself. Talking to her .

I forget about dinner until someone knocks on my door with a plate of leftovers. I thank them and get back to work. Barely notice what I'm eating. By one o'clock in the morning, I have a five-page letter that says everything I want her to know: My condolences. My regrets about the past. My genuine hopes for her happiness and health.

I leave out the crushing disappointment, the acid jealousy burning in my guts, the rage that has my feral form vibrating to murder the male lucky enough to call her his.

I seal it in an envelope, address and stamp it. After placing it carefully on the table by the door to mail tomorrow, I curl up in my nest and close my eyes. But even though I'm exhausted, I can't sleep.

Behind my lids, I see Cari getting the letter.

She's surprised. Maybe a little confused. She shows it to her husband and explains I'm just some guy from high school who had a crush. Hasn't thought of me in a decade or more. Drops it in the recycling bin.

Why even send it? I fist the sheets and try again.

She gets the letter. She presses it to her heart. She hides it from her husband and reads it in secret, tortured by what might have been. She cries over losing me.

Yes , my feral form gloats. Mate. Mine.

No. Damn it. That's not what I want, either.

She gets the letter. She's comforted by it. Happy. A little wistful, maybe. Wishes she could call me to reminisce about old times with Radar.

I push up out of bed, rip open the envelope, scribble my number at the bottom under my signature. Seal it in a fresh envelope and address it again. I pick at the stamp on the torn envelope with one claw so I can salvage it.

It rips.

Patience shot, I incinerate the old envelope and stamp. Put a new one on the re-addressed envelope. Go back to bed.

She gets the letter. She calls me. We video chat. She looks beautiful. Happy to see me. Our conversation helps her through her grief. "I wish I could give you a hug," she says.

Yes. That's what I want. How many days until my letter gets there? Mailed tomorrow, maybe three, four days? It's so annoying that it takes the postal service trucks half a week to drive a distance I could fly in one night.

I pound the mattress with my closed fist, debating. I promised Gabe I wouldn't bother Cari, but...

Fuck it. I'll deliver it myself.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Cari

A nother long day at the clinic, but I'm not tired. I tidy my office, leash up Radar, say good night to Cynthia, and head out with a bounce in my step.

Shutting off my social media after all these years was good for me, I reflect as we cross the small, empty parking lot. No more panic flutters when I see the unread message numbers climbing. No more avoiding emails because I'm afraid of what's inside them. The agent who has handled most of my brand deals is fielding questions and I'm just...free.

I should have done this sooner.

Radar's soft ears bounce as his little legs hustle across the street to the park. I can't help smiling at his jaunty confidence. We've made this walk so many times, I'm sure he could do it on his own, even without being able to see.

We turn down the curving walkway toward home. A huge figure, silhouetted by the streetlamps, steps out from behind some shrubbery right in front of us.

Panic surges through me, and I let out an ear-splitting scream. Radar snaps to attention, lunging at the end of the leash as he snarls and barks in the wrong direction.

My brave little guy. Braver than I am. I feel like I'm going to pee my pants.

"Sorry! Sorry!" The figure waves its hands and steps into a pool of light, suddenly looking a full size smaller. It's Tristan. Nobody scary. Not my stalker. My veterinary

client. “Just saw you walking by and thought I’d say hi. Didn’t mean to frighten you!”

I hiccup a laugh and crouch to pet Radar to let him know everything is okay. He quits barking and melts under my palm, leaning his head into my touch. What a good boy. “No worries. You just startled us, that’s all.”

He reaches out a hand to help me up. “Not my best conversation opener, I have to say. Ladies don’t usually scream when they see me.”

I bet they do in bed with him, though.

I keep my dirty joke to myself, grinning as he pulls me upright. I should not be having thoughts like that about my client. I’m not even attracted to him. It’s just been so long since I had anyone in my bed, I’m as horny as a teenage boy, so everything sounds loaded with innuendo.

Tristan’s handsome brow creases. “I hope this isn’t too forward, but would it be okay if I walk you home? It’s getting late, and a woman alone...”

I shake my head, waving away his concerns. “The park’s perfectly safe. We walk this way all the time.”

He grimaces. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but...you should probably vary your route. Someone could lie in wait for you if you go the same way every time.”

My worst fear. My heart skips a beat and my hand tightens on the leash. Radar feels the tension and presses close to my ankle. I nod and start to move around Tristan, but he pivots, falling into step beside me.

“I’m not trying to upset you,” he adds, sounding mortified. “It’s a general safety

thing.”

“No, you’re right. Thanks.” I smile at him. I know he’s trying to be nice. He just doesn’t know my history. “I’d be happy to have the company, but I don’t want to put you out.”

“No trouble.” He smiles back, corners of his eyes crinkling and adding the right amount of imperfection to his perfect features. “So...this is probably a bad time to ask this, given that I just terrified you, but...I have an extra ticket to the Alliance for Animal Welfare Gala on Friday night, and I wondered if you wanted to go with me? Not as a date,” he rushes to add. “As friends, of course. I don’t want the ticket to go to waste, and I thought you’d enjoy it.”

The AAW Gala is one of San Drogo’s biggest and most exclusive events, designed to attract big donors to its programs. It’s the party where people go to see and be seen, and the very expensive tickets sell out as soon as they go on sale. I’ve had my dress picked out for months because the Alliance invited me to be a guest speaker.

“Actually, I’m already going,” I confess.

He raises an eyebrow. “By yourself or...?”

“Just me and Radar. Hopefully you can find someone else to give your extra ticket. Maybe someone from your firm?” I suggest, figuring another wealthy venture capitalist would have good donor potential.

Tristan ignores the suggestion. “Let’s meet up and share a table so we’re not stuck with boring people. I refuse to engage in chitchat about the weather when I could talk geriatric cat care best practices all night instead.”

I laugh at the incongruity of this handsome, high-powered guy wanting to geek out

about aging cats. “Only you would think that was preferable.”

“Only you and me.” He winks, and I relent under his charm. We do have a lot of interests in common. Maybe Tristan and I can become real friends outside of work. Sharing a table at the gala will be fun.

“Sure, sounds good!”

Radar whimpers, pulling the leash to the side, and I glance up to see what’s garnered his attention, thinking maybe he scented a raccoon getting into one of the park trash cans. But when I realize who’s sitting on a bench just ahead of us, the rest of the world disappears.

Forget the beautiful evening. Forget the hot, interesting guy by my side. All I can see is him .

Tall, red, and handsome. The dragon of my dreams. It can’t be Zed, here in my park. It can’t. He stands up to move toward us and smiles, revealing his distinctive snaggletooth. God, it is him. His shoulders are broader, his chest thicker than I remember. But it’s him. He lifts his hand in a tentative wave, looking as dazed as I am.

“Hi,” I breathe. The corner of his mouth tilts up. I can’t look away from his face.

“Do you know this dragon?” Tristan grasps my arm, pulling me back, his voice full of concern.

“Yeah. He’s...an old friend.” Understatement of the century. He’s...my baggage. My hang-ups. My one that got away.

At our feet, Radar yips excitedly, nostrils working overtime and tail wagging

furiously. He starts bouncing like a puppy as Zed draws near. To my surprise, Zed drops to his knees in the grass to greet him.

“Hey buddy! You’re alive!” He sounds a little choked up as he scratches Radar behind the ears and ruffles his fur. Radar promptly rolls over, showing his undercarriage, and Zed obliges with belly rubs.

“Of course he is,” Tristan growls, his grip on me tightening. “Why wouldn’t he be? Cari’s the best vet in the state.”

Zed lifts his head, answering to me instead of Tristan. “He’s getting up there in years, isn’t he?”

“He’s sixteen now.” He was only a few months old when our friendship began. Less than a year old when Zed got hauled off to the monster medical center while paramedics patched up my scrapes and bruises from our big date disaster. He and Radar look natural together, though. Like no time at all has passed. “It’s so good to see you! What in the world are you doing in San Drogo?”

Zed stands, brushing the grass off his knees. “Um, work conference.”

“How long are you in town? We should find some time to catch up.”

“A few days—”

“TechMeet?” Tristan asks, cutting him off. Zed nods. “You must be pretty busy, then. Panels during the day, networking events in the evening. I know how it is at these big conferences. Hard to do anything but eat and sleep.”

Zed extends his hand. “You must be Cari’s husband. I’m Zed. Grew up in Apple Grove with her.”

“Tristan Vance.” Tristan grasps his hand, squeezing hard, and doesn’t let go.

“He’s a friend ,” I correct, since Tristan doesn’t seem to be mentioning it, adding, “I’m not married.”

“You’re not?”

“No. You?” I hold my breath, hardly daring to hope that he might be single still. I’ve never heard of a dragon who wasn’t mated by our age. They usually pair off young because of their fated-mate bonds.

Our eyes meet as he answers, and his deep-gold eyes seem to glow momentarily. “No.”

Has he been waiting for me, too? My heart’s beating so loud, he must be able to hear it. “Oh! Great! I mean, it’s not great being single. It’s...fine. It’s okay. I’m used to being alone. That’s what I meant by great. I have Radar to keep me company, so it’s not so bad.” Oh god, I’m babbling.

“She doesn’t date,” Tristan says tightly. He’s still gripping both of us, me by the upper arm and Zed by the hand, keeping us in awkwardly close proximity.

Zed ignores Tristan even though we’re basically all breathing the same air. “Are you free Friday night?”

“Yeah,” I say breathlessly, not even pausing to think.

“No, you’re not. You’re going to the Alliance for Animal Welfare Gala with me,” Tristan interjects. He drops Zed’s hand and tries to pull me closer with the other, but my feet are planted.

“Oh, right. You should come!” I tell Zed, shrugging out of Tristan’s hold. “It’s a pet-friendly event, so Radar is going, too. I got him a tiny bowtie for his collar.”

Zed grins down at Radar, who is sitting on his left shoe, patiently waiting for more head-scratches. “Cool. I’ll get a matching one.”

Tristan smiles tightly. “As adorable as that would be, the event is sold out, I’m afraid.”

“You have an extra ticket,” I remind him, bouncing a little because I’m so thrilled the universe brought Zed and me together again. How random to run into each other in the park like this! Even if nothing comes of it, it’ll be wonderful to reconnect. “Unless you had a date you wanted to invite instead? Zed and I can get together for drinks afterward if you need the ticket.”

“No,” Tristan says. “Let’s all go together. As friends.”

“Great!” I chirp.

Zed nods. “Great!”

“Great,” Tristan echoes, sounding less enthusiastic. “We’ll see you Friday, Fred.”

“Zed,” I correct, eyes still locked with my dragon. Tristan’s moving to leave, but I’m not ready to say goodbye. How in the world did Zed end up in my neighborhood park? It still seems so unreal. “Where are you staying? The Grand?” I ask, naming the closest hotel I can think of.

Zed grimaces and rubs his right horn. “It’s complicated. My...uh...flight just got in.”

“It’s getting late, Cari. We should get going,” Tristan cuts in, shifting in his polished

loafers. Why is he acting so strange and antsy? Oh, right. Impy's infusion schedule. He needs to take care of her at home, and here I am holding him up.

"You were sweet to escort me this far, but it's okay if you need to leave," I tell him. "Don't worry about waiting for me. Zed can walk us the rest of the way."

The dragon in question nods agreeably. "Happy to."

Tristan looks between the two of us, like he's gauging whether it's safe to leave me with Zed. What a sweetheart. He doesn't need to be nervous, though. The half-bath incident aside, I can't think of a safer person for me to be around than Zed.

"It's fine," I urge him. "Impy needs her infusion, right? Don't let me hold you up. I know how important she is to you, and I would never forgive myself if she suffered because of me."

"All right," he grits out. "I'll see you soon, Cari." He nods to Zed and backtracks the way we came, leaving Zed and me alone together. Well, not exactly alone. Radar circles our ankles, binding us together with his leash.

Zed grins crookedly at Tristan's retreating back. "I don't think he likes me."

"He's just worried for my safety. He was giving me a lecture about it right before you showed up, actually."

Zed hums skeptically. "I think he's worried you might like me better than him."

So he noticed the awkward tension, too. "Tristan's just a friend," I say as I bend to untangle the leash so we can walk the rest of the way home.

"Well, he's got a leg up on me, then."

I look up at him from my crouched position, surprised. The streetlamp silhouettes his broad physique, his horns glinting as he looms over me. But rather than being scary, the shape of him is oddly comforting. “What are you talking about? We’re friends!”

“I never heard from you again. I don’t blame you,” he rushes to add. “After everything that happened, I’d stay far away from dragons, too.”

I swallow hard, rising to my feet. “I didn’t, though.”

Puzzlement spreads over his face. “Didn’t what?”

“Stay away from dragons. I think I’ve only dated dragons,” I explain. It’s embarrassing to admit how I chased after them, actually. A glimpse of scales in a shade even close to Zed’s, and my head would turn. I would do anything to get their attention, thinking that if they just got to know me, I could re-create what he and I had. “It never worked out, though. They always...”

Ghosted me. Dumped me. Whatever you want to call it.

“Found their mates,” Zed finishes.

I nodded, eyes welling as I remember the pain of being rejected over and over. “Your kind’s mate bonds are strong. A girl can’t compete. So I kind of stopped dating at all.”

The look he gives me is so pitying, I cringe. Can’t meet his eyes. Can’t explain that I never brought myself to contact him because I didn’t want to learn that he’d found his mate, too. “Come on, Radar, time to go home.”

Zed matches his much longer stride to mine. “I should have reached out once the restraining order expired, but I was trying to give you space. I literally destroyed your

home. I can't imagine what you must've thought of me after seeing me like that. So out of control."

I remember exactly what I thought when he roared my name and rose up from the dust of the shattered sheetrock with flames licking around him, two huge wings sprouting from his shoulder blades and two huge erections straining between his legs.

I thought he looked powerful. Impossibly sexy. Like my own personal deity. But then I saw the blood.

"About that... Are you... Is it... okay?" I ask, unable to stop myself from glancing at his crotch. Oh my god, why am I like this?

Zed clocks the direction of my gaze and gives a rueful chuckle. "Yes. Full recovery, thanks for asking."

"Great!" I exclaim. Then, realizing how it could be taken, I quickly add, "For you, I mean. So you can use both of them. If that's a thing? Don't answer that, I just don't really know how it works. None of the dragons I dated would show me their feral form, even when I begged."

He swallows audibly. "You begged for their feral form?" he asks hoarsely.

"Not like that!" Except it was exactly like that, and my flaming-hot cheeks totally give me away.

The path in front of us splits, and Zed automatically takes the left branch, the one that leads to my house.

I jerk my head toward him, my embarrassment momentarily overshadowed by my curiosity. "How did you know the right way to go?"

He shrugs. “Radar was leaning left.”

My heart squeezes. “You two always did have a special connection.”

“We did.” He’s looking at me, though, not the dog who’s trotting happily between us. He pauses in front of the gate that leads to my little pink cottage with its yellow front door. Another coincidence, I’m sure. “Listen. There’s so much I want to catch up on. I can’t wait for Friday. Are you free tomorrow?”

I feel the same way. This feels so good, my lips and fingertips are tingling with dopamine. Not to mention other parts... I’m tempted to ask him to come inside right now. “What about your conference?”

“Fuck the conference.”

A laugh bursts out of me. “Unfortunately, I have to work tomorrow, but—”

“When do you get off? I don’t mean get off ...ugh. You know what I mean.” He rubs his horn awkwardly. “When can I pick you up? I’ll take you and Radar to dinner.”

“Six. No, six fifteen,” I amend, giving myself a few extra minutes to change after work.

“Great. Great. I can’t wait.” He stares at me like he wants to say something else, but then he just shakes his head. “Six fifteen. I’ll be there.”

Impulsively, I hug him around the waist, squeezing and releasing too fast for him to return the embrace. “Sorry. Old habits.”

“Never be sorry for that,” he says solemnly. He adjusts himself in his pants where a sizable bulge has grown. “I’m the one who should be apologizing.”

“Never be sorry for that,” I return with the same solemnity. We share stupid, giddy grins. God, how will I make it until tomorrow evening? I’m going to go inside and use every dragon dildo in my drawer.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Zed

“Good night, Cari.” It’s physically painful to leave her at her front gate. As much as I’d like to stay and watch her bedroom window until she shuts off the light like I used to at Apple Grove, I need to find a place to stay while I’m in San Diego. She mentioned a hotel that must be close by, so I’ll try there first.

Retrieving my backpack from the bush where I stashed it, I look it up on my phone. It’s just on the other side of the park, so I cut across the grass in the right direction.

Damn, Cari’s even more beautiful than I remembered. And her scent is like being punched in the face in a good way. She’s definitely my alokoi. Thank gods I made the trip and didn’t just mail the letter. I never would’ve known for sure.

“You were right,” I admit to my feral form.

Mate, he purrs, flexing. Testing my control to see if he can get away with shifting and flying back to her.

Honestly, I’m tempted. A big part of me wants to just sit on the roof of her house all night like a giant gargoyle, warning away anyone who might threaten her. She seemed a little skittish, though. Wouldn’t even look me in the eye half the time. I don’t want to freak her out right off the bat.

It’s probably pretty shocking to find out that you’re a dragon’s mate and all that goes along with that. I’ll have to find a way to break it to her gently. Although at least it sounds like she wasn’t horrified by my feral form, so that’s one hurdle crossed.

Did she really beg to see other dragons like that?

Mate . The snarl inside me is angry now. Jealous. But the logical part of me is just really fucking turned on, because she wanted a feral dragon. I have to believe that's because she wants me , the one dragon she's seen in feral form.

All this time, she's wanted me like I've wanted her.

My thoughts are interrupted when that Tristan dude pops out from behind a tree. I groan. "What are you doing here? Don't you have to feed your cat or something?"

"What are you doing here, Dragon?" he snipes back. "And don't give me that 'old friend in town for a conference' bullshit. TechMeet isn't until next week. It's no coincidence you ran into us in the park. Does Cari know you're a stalker ?"

"Does she know you're a demon?" I retort.

His glamour ripples and then firms up again. "How could you tell?"

"I know hellfire when I smell it."

"Damn it." He looks genuinely peeved. "No, she doesn't. I was going to tell her," he adds defensively. "Eventually."

He definitely was not going to tell her. "For a demon, you're a terrible liar."

"Shut up." He scrubs his hands through his hair, messing up his perfect coif. "Don't say anything, please. I really like her, and I put in the work. No demon tricks. Not many, anyway. I've spent eighteen months getting close to her, getting her to trust me. This week is the first time she's agreed to go out with me."

“As a friend,” I point out, even though I’m keenly aware that I barely have friend status myself.

“It counts.” He crosses his arms, chin jutting out stubbornly. “Don’t blow this for me. I haven’t fucked a single succubus in over a year. Look at me! It’s practically a crime for this glamour to be celibate, but here I am, saving myself for a human.”

He seems earnestly infatuated with her, but there’s not even a question in my mind of letting him have her. “She’s my alokoi, dude. I literally can’t help blowing this for you. It’s biology. There’s no way around it.”

“Shit.” He kicks the sidewalk petulantly with the toe of his shiny wingtip. I’ve never known a demon to give up that easily, though, so I brace myself for what’s to come. Sure enough, a few seconds later, he glances up at me through narrowed eyes. “If you tell her I’m a demon, I’m going to tell her that you lied about the conference and everything.”

“Won’t change the fact that she’s my fated mate.”

“Nope.” He bites off the word like it’s a juicy piece of steak. “But it’ll make it a whole lot harder for you to earn her trust, won’t it? Especially if I embellish it with some choice details that she won’t be able to sort out from the truth. She’ll go running .”

I grind the points of my teeth together. He could really fuck things up for me. Demons get very creative sometimes.

He sighs dramatically. “These humans, so flighty and unpredictable. You want her to stick around? Then let me stick around. I’m just her friend, right? No threat to you.”

I snort and cough on my own smoke. “You’re literally threatening me right now.”

His form shifts, liquid in the air, his limbs rippling into a huge, crouched, purple beast with dripping jaws that spatter the concrete path with sulfuric drool. “Let me have this ,” he snarls in a hundred demonic tones, sounding like he has a church organ in his chest. He slimes back into a human shape, wincing. He wipes a stray bit of saliva from the corner of his mouth. “Just this one event. Two civilized monsters on the town with their little human friend. I propose a gentleman’s competition. Let’s see who she’d choose if fate didn’t always have its way. Humor me, just for the night. You’ll get her in the end.”

I have zero confidence that will be the end of it, but there’s no point in provoking a demon. Especially not when my reunion with Cari has barely begun and he could still ruin it. “Fine. I won’t tell her you’re a demon before Friday if you promise to keep your mouth shut about TechMeet.”

“Perfect.” Tristan puts on an eerily charming smile before vanishing into the long shadows cast by the streetlamps.

Ugh. He’s up to something. I really hate demons.

The hotel thankfully has a room available, one with a window onto the park. If I squint, I can see the grove of trees that blocks my view of Cari’s little pink house. It’s comforting to know that she’s so close to me after all these years. And tomorrow night’s date... who knows what might happen.

I’m not even going to think about Friday’s event with Tristan. It’s a non -event in my mind. He’s going to try to put a wedge between us, but she’s my alokoi. Nothing will keep us apart. Even if he had already snared her into some unholy demon marriage contract, she would still be mine. The fated mate claim overrides any other.

My feral form roars approval that echoes through my bones, but my more logical mind tamps down its triumph. Cari isn’t married or even dating anyone else, and that

came as a huge surprise. Why? Because Gabe told me she was locked down.

A flame of anger licks up my spine. Why was he trying to keep us apart? It's late, but Gabe's still logged in to our dedicated work chat, so I send him a message.

Zed

about Cari

Gabe

did you write your letter?

Zed

I decided to deliver it in person. That's why I called out today

Gabe

wtf dude

Zed

why did you tell me she was married? She's not fucking married

Gabe

I said she was PROBABLY married

Zed

bullshit. You said married with three kids. Why'd you lie to me?

His typing dots bump and burble for way too long.

Gabe

I was just trying to protect you. Rejection hurts, man. I thought you could get closure this way without any more restraining orders being filed.

Zed

I'm a fully grown dragon. I don't need you to protect me from the consequences of my own actions

Gabe

noted

My teeth grind together. It's like he still thinks Cari would never be interested in me. Like she'd press charges if I approached her in person.

Zed

what if I told you I have a date with her tomorrow night?

Gabe

Don't forget to jerk off beforehand. Don't want a repeat

His flippant response annoys me, especially since he hasn't apologized for lying to my face to keep me away from her. And she wants to see me. She was so cute and

awkward and excited when we ran into each other. She might not feel the fated mate pull, but she likes me. She's never stopped thinking about me.

She's only dated dragons.

Zed

What if I told you she's ?? my fated mate?

Gabe's typing dots appear and disappear a few times before he sends another message.

Gabe

congrats I guess

He guesses ?! I log out of the chat before I say something I regret. He's been my friend for a long time, so I know he has the best intentions, but he's being a dick for no reason.

Well...maybe he's annoyed that I skipped work to fly to San Drogo when we're in the middle of a big project. That's fair. I'll make it up to him tomorrow. I can get some remote work done while I'm waiting to meet up with Cari.

I try to sleep in the crisp, white hotel sheets, but it's impossible. My mind spins with date ideas, work stuff, memories of Cari. Eventually, I give up, pull out my laptop, and log into the hotel Wi-Fi. Might as well do some restaurant research for tomorrow if I'm going to be awake anyway.

Before I pick a place, I open my secret spreadsheet, the one where I record everything I know about Cari. I store it in the cloud now, because I've transferred it to so many

new devices and updated the spreadsheet software so many times over the last fifteen years that I was afraid it might get lost or corrupted.

I scroll over to the “Food” tab where I keep track of the meals she’s mentioned on social media and skim through the screenshots and detailed notes on her most recent meals.

My girl likes meat. Prime rib, kebabs, juicy burgers. Perfect.

I want to take her somewhere fun, somewhere pet-friendly, somewhere where she can relax and sink her teeth into a delicious steak. Doesn’t take me long to find a casual place nearby with fantastic reviews, an outdoor patio that allows dogs, and a “Meatlovers’ Celebration Package” that I can book online when I make my reservation.

A date with Cari. It’s finally happening. If this isn’t a celebration, I don’t know what is.

Suddenly, I’m exhausted. The long flight hits me like a brick, and I’m asleep as soon as my head hits the pillow.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Zed

Why didn't I get her number last night? I'm a fucking idiot, because as soon as my eyes crack open, all I want to do is say good morning to my mate. My alokoi.

Gabe's given me so much shit for being obsessed with Cari all these years, but he has no idea of the full extent of it. Now that I'm positive she's my fated mate? I am fully indulging my feral form's obsessive, possessive impulses.

Grabbing the hotel's free breakfast on the way out the door, I jog across the park, stationing myself near the path by her house. There, I sip my coffee and nibble the gluten-free sausage biscuit until she and Radar appear. I observe them discreetly from behind a juniper bush, waving away the steam rolling off my coffee cup so it doesn't rise above the greenery and give me away.

Cari's wearing a blue version of the same scrubs she had on last night, but today she has a big tote bag over her arm that she didn't yesterday. It looks heavy. My fingers curl, and I have to bite my tongue not to call out and offer to carry it for her.

Mate, hisses a feral voice inside me, angry at me for not volunteering our superior strength.

Be cool, I warn him, even though I agree with him. Normally, I'd never let my mate do the heavy lifting when I could do it for her. But Cari has a lot to process in the next few days, and I don't want to make it any more difficult for her by popping out of a bush like a fucking jack-in-the-box every time she goes outside.

Damn, she looks good in those scrubs, though. The thin fabric pulls across her curvy ass as she walks away. I'm not expecting anything, but I'd love to be peeling those off her tonight after dinner.

Stitches pop in the crotch of my pants. Fuck me, my dick is trying to shift. Not again.

Thankfully, it chills out as soon as she's out of sight. And even though my feral form is restless and would prefer to sit outside her workplace all day, I force myself to go back to the hotel and jam out a full day of work instead of following her.

Gabe and I trade a few messages about the new app, and it all seems normal between us, so that's a weight off my shoulders. I don't want to blow up our business by oversharing about my personal life. He never talks about his relationships, and I should take a hint from that. But I have to tell somebody about what's going on. An hour before the date, I can't hold it in anymore, so I message the one person I know will be supportive.

Zed

I found my alokoi for sure

Mom

I knew it. You're a late bloomer just like your father. Who is she? Is she from our hive?

Zed

Actually, I didn't find her late. I'm just an idiot and didn't act on it when I found her. Remember Cari?

Mom

Kind of hard to forget the girl who put you in the hospital for three months.

Zed

Mom. It wasn't her fault my shift went haywire in her house.

Mom

Well, her dad didn't have to sue us for damages. We could've settled it out of court.

Zed

That's not her fault, either. Nor is it her fault that she's my alokoi. It's been her all along though

Mom

Aw, I remember you saying she smelled nice, now that I think about it. I'm so happy for you, Zedraak. Who would've thought we'd have a human in the family? Bring her to dinner tonight!

Zed

I guess you didn't see my note. I'm in California. San Drogo, where she lives. Flew down yesterday. And I haven't exactly told her yet.

Mom

Zed!!! What are you waiting for?!

Zed

We have our first date tonight. Wish me luck

Mom

You don't need luck when fate is on your side, darling.

Mom's right. I don't need luck. Cari and I just need a little time to get reacquainted, and that's exactly what we'll have this evening. Bolstered by the conversation, I shine my horns, twist my hair up in a bun, and get dressed for the date in a nice pullover and khakis. I want to look relaxed but not sloppy when I show up at her clinic. I want her to smile when she sees me.

Shit, I should bring her flowers. I don't have to open the spreadsheet to know her favorite. Sunflowers. I'll grab some from a corner store on the way if they have any.

My feral form scoffs at me and flexes his wings, offering to fly to a florist shop.

"No," I say out loud in my sternest voice. "Stop. You're going to rip my shirt, and I only brought one. I'm not picking Cari up half-naked."

As if in answer, my khakis suddenly strain to their limit. I pop the button and the zipper splits of its own accord, spilling open. I stare down at my unruly half-shifted cocks in dismay.

"You've got to be kidding. You're really fucking me over here," I mutter to mindless beast inside me. I can't even remember the last time I couldn't control my shift. "I hope you're pleased with yourself. We can't go on a date unless our dicks fit in our pants."

My feral form purrs and shows me an image of Cari's ass in her scrubs. Then he imagines stalking her, grabbing her, and flying her off to a cave. In his fantasy, he shreds the blue material with his claws. He's pretty clear that pants and shirts aren't necessary.

"No. No . We are not doing that. That's not what a date is."

I check the time. Twenty minutes until our scheduled date. Twenty minutes to get both of them under control. Even if I can wrestle them into my pants, I'll be working all evening to keep them from shifting in Cari's presence.

My cocks throb at the mention of her name. My beast wants to make himself known. But I don't want to be known for jerking off in a place of business...nor for accidentally pulverizing a public restroom.

Annoyed that Gabe's snarky advice was probably right, I kick out of my khakis so they don't get stained and storm to the bathroom.

I press my forehead to the shower wall and lean over the drain, a cock in each hand. I wonder what Cari will think of them. The upper one, the one that persists in my more humanoid form, has three pronounced bulges that barely fit in my fist. I'd be worried that she'd find it too monstrous except she said she's dated dragons before, so she knows what to expect.

The lower one, the cock that only emerges when I shift, ironically looks mostly human, albeit with a more tapered head. But it hides a secret at the base: a knot that will swell dramatically inside my mate and lock us together. It's more sensitive, too.

I squeeze it, groaning as it sends a pulse of hot need up my spine. I'm not sure a human will be able to handle taking a knot. Cari's a lot smaller than dragon females, and even dragon females only take the knot in their feral form.

“Mate .” My beast growls, showing me several rapid-fire images of Cari bent over, stretching around his knot. Fuuuck, she looks amazing like that. He agrees. He’s confident in her ability to take it like this, in half-shift, and that makes both my cocks drool greedily all over the tile floor.

The cool marble shower tile feels great against my heated scales as I milk them, desperate to come so I can go on this date without him growling and whining in my ear all night. He wants to fantasize about Cari? I’ll let him have his way to get this over with more quickly. He immediately supplies me with a ready montage, and I fall into the scene, stroking myself with both hands.

I pick her up at her clinic. She’s wearing the same blue scrubs. When she sees me, she smiles. Lifts up her arms to be carried. I pick her up and shift at the same time. Two beats of my wings, and we’re soaring, her soft curves pressed against my feral form’s hard belly plates.

A cave in the sea cliff. Private, dark. I lay her down, and somehow her blue scrubs have transformed into the pale blue formal gown that has haunted my dreams. I cut the filmy fabric off with my claws, prowling around her as I decide how to make her mine. She arches, reaching for my cocks.

Before she even gets her imaginary hands on them, my upper cock swells and unloads, splattering the tile and my feet. I’d be embarrassed if this weren’t a fantasy. Since it is, Cari just looks happy, rubbing my cum into her skin.

My upper cock softens, giving me hope that I’ll be fit to take the real Cari out on a real date...one that doesn’t end in kidnapping a fawning, blow-up version of the woman I love.

My feral form is unsatisfied, though, showing me more images of Cari with her legs parted, touching herself with one hand as she squeezes my knot with the other. She

bites her lip, her arousal perfuming the cave as she strokes us both. I lick into her mouth and pump my hips into her hand, dragging my knot through her tight little grip.

Fuck, this is wrong. If she knew I was picturing her like this, captive and objectified, she'd think I was a major creep. But it feels so good. Maybe I am a creep.

Mate , my beast whines, sounding offended that I'd characterize his desires like that. As if to prove his point, the fantasy shifts slightly. Now she's panting and begging, tugging me toward her like my lower cock is a leash.

See how we please her? he seems to be saying, as if this isn't just another one of his (and my) deepest fantasies.

Fantasy-Cari uses my lower cock to rub her clit, her cheeks and chest flushing, until she shudders and calls out my name, lost in the force of her orgasm. I rock against her until her eyes blink open, limpid and dark, and a smile curves her sweet mouth.

Hot pleasure slides up my spine at the sight of her so well-satisfied. I can't take it anymore. My knot swells, pushing my fingers apart as I come even harder than the first time. I clench my teeth so tightly, my jaw pops, and I swear I black out for a minute or ten. Time has lost all meaning.

I laze against the shower wall as I rinse the mess down the drain, feeling like a giddy genius in the afterglow, like it really was Cari in the cave and not just a beast-dream. I mentally pat myself on the back for having the foresight to take off my pants and get into the shower, because cleanup is easy and my clothes won't be stained when I pick up Cari.

When I pick up Cari...

Awareness returning in a rush, I glance at my watch. I'm supposed to be there in five minutes, and her clinic is ten minutes away.

Damn it. No time for flowers.

Fly , my feral form argues.

“You really want to get arrested today?” I argue right back as I hurriedly yank on my pants. My half-shift has fully retreated, so I only have one cock to manage, and it's getting softer as I speak.

My beast shows me the jail walls disintegrating just like Cari's bathroom. He's fully aware that no cell could hold us, especially with our mate on the other side.

“That's a good way to get banned from the human realm forever,” I remind him.

Mate , he whimpers.

“Exactly. She's here, so I have to be here, which means following human laws. Even if I'm late and don't have flowers because I'm a creep who jerks off before dates. Better late than never, right?”

Especially if it means my dicks stay in my pants for the rest of the night.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Cari

Zed's late. I reached down to pet Radar, who's antsy to leave the clinic and head home. He doesn't know we are going out, but he's going to be so excited once we get there. It'll be worth these extra fifteen minutes on the hard waiting-room chairs.

Cynthia gives me a sympathetic look from her desk. "His loss, honey," she says.

"He'll be here." I hope.

I realized after he left last night that I hadn't given him my clinic address. But it can't be that hard to find me now that he knows I'm a vet and live in San Drogo. I might have changed my last name, but there are only a handful of vet clinics in town and only one with a vet named Cari.

I still can't believe we ran into each other like that. How lucky!

"Ope, I think you have a visitor," Cynthia says in her adorable Midwestern accent. Bells jingle on the door, and when Zed strolls in, her eyebrows shoot up. Maybe I forgot to mention that he's a dragon.

He's even more handsome in the daylight. His long hair is swept back into a loose man-bun between his polished horns, giving him an air of a swashbuckling fantasy hero. Broad shoulders test the limits of his pullover, its navy-blue hue setting off his gorgeous red scales. Neat khakis that show off his muscular thighs complete the look.

He looks confident. He looks like an adult. He looks like he tried . He definitely

dressed for the date.

I'm so, so glad that I changed out of my work clothes into my favorite red dress. I bought it a few years ago because the color reminded me of Zed, actually, and it's the one item of clothing I put on when I want to feel sexy and confident. I put on a quick swipe of lipstick and a strappy pair of sandals, but I wish I'd had time to do my hair.

I stand to greet him, and his eyes rake me up and down before landing on my face. "Cari," he breathes. "You look stunning."

Cynthia sighs dreamily behind her desk, and I feel myself flush. "Thank you, so do you."

He grins crookedly at the compliment. "I made reservations at a place that isn't far. You don't mind walking in those heels?"

I shake my head. "Radar would love to stretch his legs after a long day at work, anyway. What is that, hair gel?" I squint at a shiny droplet on the lobe of his elegantly pointed ear. It must be styling product left from his pre-date routine.

I swipe it off his ear with two fingers and comb it through my curtain bangs to keep them out of my face. It's scented like cinnamon and cardamom, spicy and sweet. Men's grooming supplies always have such yummy fragrance. "Mmm, this smells great!"

Zed looks like he swallowed a fly as he watches me style my hair. He leans forward, bending so he can draw a deep breath. He hovers inches away, running his snout along my shoulder and neck to my hairline. His proximity raises goosebumps on my skin.

He must be affected by the closeness, too because his voice is thick as he says, "It

smells great on you .”

Cynthia sighs again, and then pipes up, “You better run along, you two, if you’re trying to make your reservation on time. Don’t want to spend your date in a waiting room, do you?”

“I think I’ve spent enough time waiting for this date,” Zed agrees, winking at me. I loop my arm through his, and we head out. As we walk, I’m hyper-conscious of how close he is to me, his body heat radiating through his clothes. At this point, I don’t even care about having dinner. I just want to take him home and make up for lost time.

But we have things to talk about. A lot of things. And I’m not sure I can take it if we connect and then he bails on me when he finds his mate.

When we reach the sidewalk, Radar tugs the end of the leash in the direction of the park, but Zed leads us east toward San Drogo’s cute little downtown district. When Radar realizes we’re taking a different route than usual, he hugs close to my ankle, using my movements as a guide.

“I’m glad you showed up,” I say, squeezing Zed’s forearm. It flexes under my fingers like a dog begging for more pets. “When you were late, I realized I didn’t tell you where I worked. I hope it wasn’t too hard to find me.”

“Sorry about that. I lost track of time in the shower.” He sounds embarrassed.

There’s an awkward pause as the thought of him with water cascading over his naked body momentarily distracts me. I fumble for words. “Um. Yeah. Uh. Don’t worry about it. Glad you’re...um...clean. Glad for you, I mean. I don’t mind if you’re dirty. You can be dirty all you want. Oh no, that sounded different coming out of my mouth than it did in my head.”

I want to lift up the sidewalk and crawl underneath it, but Zed just laughs, tugging me into his side. “I’ll be as dirty as you want me to be,” he growls playfully, making my heart and my pussy flutter in unison.

This is really happening. Zed’s here and he’s single and he’s flirting with me . Who cares how it ends if I can enjoy it while it lasts, right?

He nods to a restaurant up ahead. Light and music spill from the windows onto the patio in front, where tables are set up under glowing string lights. “That’s our spot. I thought Radar would like to be outside. Their website said they’ll even bring a special meal out for dogs. Have you eaten there before?”

I nod, warmed that he thought so much about Radar’s comfort. “Cynthia’s granddaughter had her sixth birthday there. It was really cute. They have great burgers.”

“Blue cheese and bacon, pickles on the side, right?” He grins at my open-mouthed expression. “You thought I’d forget your usual order?”

“It’s been fifteen years!”

“And no time at all,” he says solemnly, turning to face me. “Listen, Cari. I wrote you a letter, but I might as well say it out loud. I’ve been kicking myself—”

Before I can find out why, we’re interrupted by the cheery host. “Table for two for Glisson? Aw, and we have a little buddy. Hi, little buddy,” he says to Radar. “I’ll bring him out a bowl once we get you three settled, how does that sound?”

Zed nods and doesn’t finish his thought. Our table is awesome, right by the outdoor fireplace. Even though it’s not a chilly night, it’s still extra cozy to have the flames licking nearby. Radar settles under the table by my feet, and the host brings us all

water.

“Meatlovers’ Celebration Package, right?” he asks, winking. Zed nods, and the host adds, “I’ll get that started for you, then.”

The host vanishes again, and we share an awkward silence until I motion to the fire. “This is nice. Reminds me a little of the hive on feast nights. Do they still have those?”

“Yep. Same as always.” He leans forward, propping his elbows on the table. “Not much has changed in Apple Grove. I live in the same place. Still have the same friends. Doing the same old stuff, hanging out in the woods and messing around on computers.”

I grin, matching his posture. “I bet things have changed more than you realize.”

“Only thing different is you’re not there. I’ve missed you, Cari.”

My heart skips a beat. “I missed you, too. I’ve spent a lot of time wishing I could talk to you.”

His brow ridges raise. “Really? Why didn’t you answer my letters?”

I frown. I don’t remember getting anything from him. Not a single one. It broke my heart, even though I understood why he never contacted me. “What letters?”

“I wrote a bunch in the hospital, but they didn’t let me send them because of the lawsuit.”

I wince, remembering the hostile legal battle between my dad and the hive. A lot of angry words were traded and legal fees were paid before they reached a settlement.

“No wonder I didn’t get them.”

Now it’s Zed’s turn to frown. “I sent them later in one big batch after the protection order expired. It was a whole box.” He draws a shoebox size in the air. “You didn’t get it?”

I shake my head. “We moved a few times, and then I went to college. Maybe they got lost. I wish I’d known. I would have written to you.”

A few beats pass. “Why didn’t you?”

I look down at the wooden tabletop, its warm, battered surface a welcome distraction. “I sent you a card at the hospital, but it was returned.” I remember the day I got the card back, the word “REFUSED” scrawled across the hospital’s address. How my heart sank. “When my dad saw it, he told me about the protection order. By the time it expired a year later, I was...distracted.”

“Dating,” Zed says, with gentle understanding.

I nod, trying to stop my memories from slipping back to the guy I was with at the time. A bright-orange dragon from Boston, he came to Oregon to play beastball. I was working overtime as a cleaner to save up for college, but I did everything to make our busy schedules align. Pulled double shifts so we’d have the same days off. Watched his practices. Traveled to games. But one day in May, at a beastball match in Seattle, he scented his mate in the crowd, and it was like I ceased to exist.

“Sort of. I was going through a bad breakup. I spent the summer crying and building up @SeeRadarRun enough that I could afford tuition. School and content creation kept me busy for the next few years. But I always thought of you.”

The host reappears tableside, with a platter in one hand and a ridiculous, pig-shaped

hat in the other. “Ladiessss first!” he announces, plopping the pig on top of my head and sliding the platter onto the table in front of me. It’s completely filled by two gigantic sausages. He fishes a stopwatch from the pocket on his apron. “On your mark, get set—”

“Wait, wait,” I say, giggling and waving my hands for him to stop. “What are we doing here?”

“The Sausage Showdown!” he says cheerily. “You have thirty seconds to Eat! That! Meat! Ready, set, go!” He clicks the stopwatch, and I stare across the table at Zed, a little bewildered.

“Did you plan this?”

He shrugs, looking as confused as I feel. I shrug back. I guess we’re doing it. I push up the sleeves of my dress and grab one of the sausages, stretching my mouth around the end. It barely fits.

Before my first bite, I’m not sure I can handle it. But the sausage turns out to have a great snap, and inside it’s salty, chewy, and delicious. This won’t be bad at all. The second and third bites go down just as easily.

“Go, piggy piggy, go piggy piggy, go!” shouts the host enthusiastically, watching seconds tick by on the watch. “Fifteen, fourteen...”

Diners at the other tables turn toward me to watch the spectacle as I double my efforts, cramming as much of the sausage into my mouth as I can with each bite. The attention feels awesome and helps me power through the last ten seconds. By the time the stopwatch alarm sounds, I’ve eaten over fifty percent of the enormous thing. I finish with grease dripping down my chin and the end of the sausage clutched in both hands.

The people around us cheer. I raise my half-eaten meat in triumph, feeling like the queen of a barbarian horde...until I remember this is supposed to be a romantic date, and here I gobbled half my weight in sausage and have grease up to my elbows.

I glance across the table, cringing. Zed slow-claps, his grin wide and admiring. "Impressive," he says, and it sounds like he means it.

"I just...really like meat," I explain sheepishly.

"That's what she said," quips the host. He plucks the pig hat from my head and pauses momentarily before shrugging and hanging it on one of Zed's horns. He looks pretty ridiculous with it dangling there. It makes me smile that he's such a good sport.

"Your turn, big boy," the host says, resetting the clock and passing the platter to Zed. "Let's see who can gobble that hog down the fastest. Are you ready to Eat! That! Meat?"

"Listen, we don't need to compete," Zed says quickly. "Cari gets the crown for sure."

"You booked the celebration package, sir," the host reminds him. He clicks the button. "Go piggy piggy, go piggy piggy, go!"

"You call him 'piggy piggy', too?" I pretend-pout to the host. "I thought you and I had something special."

Zed gasps dramatically. Then he grabs the sausage, tosses it into the air, tips his head back, and swallows it in one gulp. My jaw practically hits the floor.

He shrugs sheepishly at my expression. "Dragon advantage. I really like meat, too."

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Zed

If I had any doubts that Cari was the ideal woman—or that jerking off before this date was a good idea—watching her put away that giant sausage with my cum in her hair put them all to rest. She’s perfect for me, game for anything life might throw at her... like a dragon fated mate with two dicks and a hair-trigger shift. And she smells fucking amazing with my scent all over her.

I have to tell her tonight. She can handle it. She can handle me .

“He’s the king!” the host belts. “The king of eating the whole thing!” A group of servers gathers around, clapping in tandem and shouting, “King of the thing, king of the thing, king of the thing!” One of them crowns me with a gold plastic circlet, and Cari joins in the clapping, laughing, until they finish their song.

“I’ll bring out your next course right out,” the host promises, sweeping the platter off the table.

“I’m a little afraid of what that might be,” I confess to Cari after he leaves. “I didn’t know exactly what I was signing up for. I’m sorry if it’s not quite what you expected from a first date.”

“I think this is awesome. Definitely memorable.”

I know I’ll never get the image of her wrapping her pretty little mouth around that sausage out of my mind. “Agreed.”

“I know you were trying to let me win, but I’m glad you didn’t. It’s more fun if it’s a real competition.”

“You goaded me into it!” I chuckle. “You knew what you were doing, flirting with the host like that.”

“Yep. And it worked.” Cari looks pretty pleased with herself. “Please don’t make ‘piggy piggy’ my pet name, by the way.”

I love that she’s thinking of the future. Thinking of us as a couple. This feels so natural, like no time has passed at all. Like we’ve been together all along.

“Never,” I swear. “I’ll call you Queen.” She makes a confused face, and I motion to the crown wedged between my horns. “Obviously, if I’m the king, you’re the queen.”

A slow smile spreads across her face. She knows what I’m getting at. Because you don’t become queen by dating a king, do you? Only by marrying him. “Obviously,” she repeats, her cheeks flushing.

She’s so damn beautiful . Why did I wait all this time to find her again?

“I wish I’d tried harder,” I say without thinking. “I wish I hadn’t listened to anybody else.”

“What do you—”

“Aaaaaand here’s our Meatball Match-Up!” Cari’s question is cut off by the return of the host. This time he has two plates full of meatballs balanced on one arm and a stack of sauce cups in the other hand. He spreads it all out in front of us with practiced flair. “You’ve got marinara, barbecue, sweet-and-sour, and spicy mustard. First one to finish their plate wins. Watch out for the toothpicks! Now it’s time to

Eat! That! Meat!”

I could finish the plate in fewer than five minutes, but I take my time instead, enjoying the view of Cari with sticky hands and sauce smudged across her cheek.

“You’re so gorgeous,” I tell her. She pauses mid-meatball, her cheeks full like a chipmunk, but she has to hold back her smile to keep the food in her mouth. Instead, she puts her foot on mine under the table, a private acknowledgement of the compliment.

She has no idea what those little feet do to me. Wrapped up in the strappy heels she’s wearing tonight? I’d rather have those toes in my mouth than these meatballs, no matter how succulent they might be.

I have to get my thoughts under control or my feral form is going to take advantage of how weak she makes me. I focus on my plate and try to eat like a human. The last thing I need is toothpicks stuck in my throat and another date with Cari cut short by a trip to the monster medical center.

She has a good head start on me and is close to finishing her plate, so I speed up, skipping the sauces and just sliding meatballs off their toothpicks with a practiced flick of my claws. But I pause when I feel Radar’s tiny paws on my shin.

When I glance down at him, he rests his chin on my knee, whining. All the meat smells must be driving him crazy. Even though they brought him out a dog-designed meal, I can’t resist his cuteness. I slip him a plain meatball under the table.

Immediately, a buzzer sounds. “Disqualified!” the host announces.

Cari frowns, cleaning the sauce from her face and fingers with her napkin. “What? Why?”

The host nods at me. “He fed some of his meatballs to the dog. Automatic disqualification.”

“I don’t mind if my dog is on his team,” Cari assures him, shooting me a mushy grin that tells me I’m the real winner. Apparently, the best way to her heart is still through Radar.

“Our restaurant, our rules,” the host says cheerfully, producing another gold crown and plopping it on her head, where its plastic gleam can’t compete with the shine of her sleek blonde bob. “Meatball Matchup goes to the Carnivore Queen!”

“Carnivore Queen! Carnivore Queen!” the other servers chime in, clapping. Cari beams at them, adjusting her crown and preening until the hubbub dies down.

“All right, lovebirds. I’ll be back with your final celebration course,” the host chirps, dashing off again.

“It’s not really fair that I won,” Cari says, sounding a little self-conscious as we both take off our crowns and place them on the table. She slips Radar another one of the leftover meatballs, which he gobbles down so quickly that he could be part dragon.

“You were going to win anyway. You were way ahead.”

“Only because you let me.”

“Only because I couldn’t stop watching you put away those meatballs. You’re...”

“A piggy piggy?” She giggle-snorts. “Seriously, though, don’t call me that.”

“A wonder. I’ve always thought so.”

A smile rounds her cheeks, but there's puzzlement in her clear blue eyes. "Why did you mean before, when you said you shouldn't have listened to other people?"

I wince. "I listened to friends who said I should leave you alone after you didn't respond to my messages." It sounds dumb when I say it out loud, especially now that it's so clear that Cari's my alokoi. My feral form, which has been sated into sleep by the sausage and meatballs, wakes up enough to agree. He told me all along that she was special.

Surprise flits through her expression. "You messaged me?"

I nod. "Your @SeeRadarRun account. I...uh...am a fan." A huge fan. The biggest fan. The kind who keeps spreadsheets. She doesn't need to know that, though. "My username is Zedible. Like 'edible' with a Z. I thought I was being clever when I picked it, but I didn't realize the uh...connotations. Let's just say it's led to a lot of unsolicited messages."

Cari giggles as she pulls out her phone. She scrolls through it, her forehead scrunched in concentration. "Oh my god. Here you are." She flashes the screen toward me, where I see my name and the unread message, sent seven years ago.

I remember what it says because I agonized over every word.

Zedible

I ran across your account and recognized Radar.

(Lies. I'd been following for years already.)

Zedible

You probably don't remember me from high school, but I just wanted to say hi!

(Another lie. Of course she'd remember the dragon who destroyed her house on the first date.)

Zedible

If you ever find yourself in Apple Grove, I'd love to buy you a cup of coffee and catch up.

(Lie upon lie. How about, "I'd love to lick you from head to toe and make you mine forever"? That'd be a whole lot more accurate.)

"I wish I'd seen this," she says sadly, turning it back to read through the message. "I would have said yes in a heartbeat. This was during a really bad time, so I wasn't reading messages." She swallows hard and clicks off the phone, like she's banishing the source of the bad memories.

"What happened?" I'm gripping the edge of the table so hard, my claws make grooves in the wooden surface.

"I had a pretty persistent cyberstalker. He harassed me every way he could. Emails, voicemails, messages, letters, gifts. Every time I blocked him, he would just make new accounts. It got so bad that I almost shut down my socials. I was this close, but I really needed the income to pay for vet school.

"Instead I stopped reading direct messages and had all of my brand deals go through an agent. It took some of the fear away to be less accessible to him. He still left me weird porch presents, but I didn't have to listen to the creepy voice memos he sent or read his sick fantasies."

My feral form isn't sleeping anymore. He's wide-awake and ready to defend her. "Who was it? Did they catch him?"

She shakes her head. "He was never caught. I got a doorbell camera until I graduated, and then I changed my name and moved. So far, it's worked. I haven't heard from him since then."

"That's good," I grit out, making a mental note to get my hands on any evidence I can so I can hunt him down and make them pay for terrifying her. "I'm glad you don't have to be afraid anymore."

Especially because if he tries anything, I'm going to be there.

Cari's smile turns sad. "I'm not as scared as I used to be, but I can't say I'm ever fully relaxed. I always feel like someone's watching me. Following me. I'm probably just being paranoid, though. I've had those feelings forever, even back when you and I were friends."

Back when I was the one following her, watching her while she slept. She could feel me there.

At first, I'm warmed by the thought that she was thinking of me while I was thinking of her, but then a chill settles over me. If she learns I've been stalking her all these years, she's going to think I was this guy.

Dammit. I can't tell her that we're mates tonight because she knows about the biological imperatives for dragons. The focus on our mates. The need to track and watch. I thought she could handle anything, but this is the one thing that will freak her out.

I'm barely back in her life. The news that I have an ongoing obsession with the smell

of cum in her hair and have been recording every detail about her since the day we met is not going to go over well. But I'm not going to lie to her, either.

“You're not being paranoid. You're being smart,” I assure her. “If you think someone's watching you, trust your intuition.”

Cari

Zed's advice is honestly the nicest compliment anyone's ever paid me. I can't remember anyone else ever hearing about my fears and turning that around to say yeah, trust your gut. If you don't feel safe, you're not safe.

Usually they'd tell me I worried too much or that I should practice mindful breathing. Like the power of my mind was going to keep this stalker creep from sending me maps of remote wilderness areas and lists of things he was going to do to me there.

I want to thank him, but that's just weird, so I nod. "I'll do that."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see our host making a beeline for our table with a new set of platters. These contain a row of fried chicken wings covered in glossy, sticky sauce. Any other dish, and I might not be able to complete the third challenge. But hot wings? I can always eat another one.

"Ooh, yummy!" I clap excitedly when he sets the plates down in front of us, along with two glasses of milk and two pairs of latex gloves. Zed's eyes glow at me across the table while the host explains the game.

"This challenge is called Beat That Heat ! Start with the wing on the left, then work your way down the row, head-to-head. Each wing gets spicier until you get to our famous Volcanic Eruption Wing. Whoever makes it the furthest along the row before 'chickening' out is the champ!"

As soon as he says go, Zed and I are in it to win it, trash talking, laughing, bragging,

and enjoying our way through the whole series of wings.

“You a fan of spicy food, I guess?” he asks when we reach the end of the row, nodding to the so-called Volcanic Eruption Wings we’re both holding.

“My favorite. It has been ever since those hive feasts woke up my tastebuds,” I admit. “Never met a spicy bite since that I didn’t like.”

His crooked smile shows his adorable snaggletooth. “I should have known. You’re perfect in every way.”

I’m far from perfect, but I fall for the sweet talk hook, line, and sinker. I feel my cheeks burning even more than they already are from the wing sauce. I want to finish this meal and take him home and make up for years apart.

He didn’t ghost me like the other dragons I dated. He wanted me the whole time. He reached out to me and then respected my space when I didn’t answer. If you ask me, he’s pretty perfect, too.

“You want to go first?” I wave my wing around and slurp a big pre-emptive drink of milk. “Just warning you so you don’t get your hopes up: I’m going to finish it, no problem.”

“Let’s go at the same time.” He holds up his wing. “To happy endings.”

I tap mine against it, holding eye contact. “To our happy ending.”

The Volcanic Eruption wing is a challenge even for me. It’s delicious, though, sweet and vinegary behind the blast of heat from the ghost-pepper base. Zed and I finish our wings at the same time and grin giddily at each other over the pile of bones between us.

“The buzzer,” the host reminds us.

“You go,” I say, knowing he purposely matched my pace and could’ve finished even faster.

He shakes his head. “No, you. I insist.” The growly command in his voice makes my core clench.

“Together?” I suggest, stripping off my spicy gloves.

He does the same and takes my hand. Together, we press the button to a chorus of awww s from the diners and servers who have been spectating. Even with all the attention and chaos in the restaurant, Radar bouncing around under the table, and my stomach stretched to the limit, all I can feel is Zed’s hand around mine.

Neither one of us lets go. I’m so focused on our point of connection that I hardly notice when the host crowns us champions and takes our picture to put on the wall as the first couple ever to finish both Volcanic Eruption wings. I eat my dessert with my left hand. Zed pays the check with his right. And we leave the restaurant with our fingers still tangled together.

It’s a beautiful night, clear and cool with a gentle sea breeze. A few stars are visible, though not nearly as many as in Apple Grove, where there’s less light pollution from city streetlamps. Walking together with Radar at our side and full stomachs from a feast reminds me of the old days, and it makes my heart ache a little because I know it’s just temporary.

It can’t last more than a day or two. Zed has to go back after his conference is done. And even if we stay in touch, there’s going to come a point when he finds his fated mate. But I don’t want to think about that right now. I just want to enjoy what we have tonight.

“I could get used to this,” he comments as we wind our way through San Drogo’s cute little downtown, heading in the general direction of the park.

I nod. “The weather’s nice here. You should stay.” My joke comes out half-hearted because I really mean it.

His fingers, a few degrees warmer than a human’s would be, tighten around mine. “This . Not the weather.”

“Oh.” I squeeze back. “I agree. I mean, I know we have to let go, but...”

“No, we don’t!”

A laugh bursts out of me at his stubborn tone. “Eventually. We can’t do everything one-handed.”

“I don’t know why not. We already proved we can eat and walk. I am positive we can sleep like this. So I don’t foresee any problems holding hands with you forever.”

Forever! I know he’s just playing around, but the lick of hope that runs over me is intoxicating.

“What if one of us needs to pee?” I ask, still giggling as we cross the street and enter the park. I give Radar a little more slack on the leash now that we don’t have to worry about cars and bikes so he can ramble and sniff.

“We’ll leave the door cracked open and take turns standing outside.”

“What about clothing? Shirts are going to be tough to get on and off.”

He chuckles. “Hm. I’m pretty sure I can cut these off us with my claws.”

My breath catches. I wouldn't mind sacrificing my favorite dress to see that fantasy come to life. "Wh-what about putting them back on?" I stutter, feeling tongue-tied.

He shrugs his impossibly broad shoulders. "Do we really need clothes?"

Heat creeps over my whole body. I feel like I'm naked already. "Maybe in the winter?" I squeak, playing along.

He pauses in the circle of a streetlamp's glow, using our joined hands to twirl me around before pulling me close. Loose loops of leash slide down my legs and pool at my ankles. "I'll keep you warm," he says, his voice a low promise that's backed up by a very sizeable hardness sandwiched between us.

I'm warm. So warm my center is melting like the chocolate lava cake we had for dessert. I'd be tempted to touch him if I had a free hand, but one arm's doing leash duty and the other one's still firmly in his grip.

"Kiss me," I order, turning my face up to his. A tiny thread of smoke leaks from Zed's nostrils, and he gives an embarrassed cough.

"I have a confession to make," he says, pausing for an awkward moment. "I still haven't kissed anyone. I'm not really sure how to do it."

"Never?" I gape at him, trying to wrap my head around it. "You haven't dated at all?"

He looks uncomfortable. "I didn't say that. I've just only dated other dragons. I wouldn't even call it dating."

"Hookups?" I supply, feeling an unwelcome tinge of bitterness toward all the dragons who dumped me. I wish I'd realized sooner that they don't take dating as seriously as humans do. It's just a way to pass the time until they find their mates. "One-night

stands?”

“No! Friends with benefits, maybe, but truly friends. Anyway, our kind doesn’t usually kiss. Nothing against it. It’s just when your partner breathes fire, it’s not the first thing you think of. And I haven’t been with any humans, so...” Zed gives my hand a squeeze, his expression open and vulnerable. “You’ll have to teach me how. I promise, I won’t burn you or bite you. Just don’t laugh too much at my early attempts.”

I bite my lip. He’s so cute and earnest, I can’t stand it. “However you kiss me will be the best kiss ever, because it’s you.”

“Cari,” he says roughly. “I should have done this fifteen years ago.” Then he crushes his mouth to mine.

His lips are hot and firm, with a slight scrape of scales that raises goosebumps on my skin. He keeps them tightly shut, any teeth and flames trapped safely behind them, though the restraint makes his frame quiver in time with my racing heart.

For a second, the whole sky spins like we’re its axis. This—this practically chaste, storybook-ending kiss—it is the best ever. There’s nothing to compare.

He pulls back, panting slightly. “How was that?”

“Perfect. Again. More.” I lean into him, and he chuckles, giving me three quick kisses in a row and then one long, honeyed press. It’s so sweet, I can’t help letting my tongue out to taste him, darting across his lower and upper lips in turn before teasing the seam between them.

He’s flavored like chocolate and sharp spice. Maybe it’s the ghost of our dinner I’m tasting, but somehow I think the intoxicating, spicy-sweet combination is just him .

“Yum,” I whisper.

His chest vibrates with a growl. Then his tongue meets mine, stroking against it before expertly invading my mouth. It’s shockingly heated and demanding after the polite, unpracticed pecks, and I’m completely at his mercy.

I pull back, gasping. “I thought you said you’d never kissed before.”

Zed smirks, eyes twinkling. “Lots of experience licking, though. I didn’t know that was part of it.”

“It’s the main part. The good part. I mean, the other part was good, too, don’t get me wrong. But the tongue stuff was great. Better than great! You could do it again anytime, anywhere. I mean anywhere in town, not anywhere on my body,” I correct hastily, realizing how my words could be misconstrued. I’m blushing and babbling, and I can’t seem to stop. “Not that I would mind that either. Actually, you can do that again anytime, anywhere, anywhere.”

Zed lifts his brow. “Like...right now? Right here? Right here ?” He bends and licks a stripe from my collarbone up the side of my neck. “Is that what you meant?”

“Yep!” I squeak. Is this real life, or am I dreaming? It has to be real, because it’s so much better than my imagination. I close my eyes, lifting my face for another kiss.

I feel the leash tighten around my ankles a split second before Radar erupts in a flurry of loud, sharp barks. He hits the end of the long lead with a snap that jerks me off balance.

I careen to one side, stumbling out of Zed’s embrace with my arms flailing. My hand yanks out of his as I struggle to recover my footing, but my sandal’s narrow heel catches in the gap between the path and the grass that lines it.

I go down . It's not a graceful whoopsie-daisy, either. It's a full-on faceplant. I taste dirt .

"Are you okay?!" Zed's urgent question is nearly drowned out by Radar's nonstop barking. Zed kneels and grasps my ankle, supporting it as he frees my shoe. I felt the strap of it snap when I fell, but thankfully it broke so my ankle didn't.

"Yeah," I say weakly, pushing myself up with scraped palms to see what set the dog off. There's nothing I can see disturbing the peaceful evening, though. Besides the occasional croak of a treefrog, we're the only ones out this late. "Radar, hush. There's nothing there." Of course, he doesn't listen to me, his growls and barks still echoing through the empty park.

"Radar!" I call more sharply, and finally his head swivels around. He trots back over to us, loosening the leash enough for me to slip my legs out of its snare. I scratch between his ears. "Good boy. He probably caught the scent of an animal," I say apologetically to Zed. I take off my other shoe and rise with his help, wincing as my ankle twinges a little when I put weight on it.

"What is it?" he asks, noticing my expression.

I give an ungraceful step. It hurts, but it's nothing terrible. I take another one. Ouch. "Just twisted my ankle a bit. I can walk it off."

"Cari." His tone is... something . A heady mix of scolding, affection, amusement, longing. He plucks the leash from my hand, loops it over his wrist, and grabs my broken shoes. With his other arm, he whisks me off my feet and cradles me against his chest. "You're not walking anywhere."

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Zed

I can smell Tristan's shitty hell-magic. Radar can, too. He must be skulking around the park, watching us, maybe hoping to interfere with our date. But I'm not going to let him ruin our perfect evening, so I make a beeline for Cari's house as fast as Radar's little legs will allow.

She is oblivious, smiling up at me with pink cheeks and a sheepish smile. "You don't have to carry me all the way. I'm too heavy. It's too far."

I shake my head. "You weigh nothing. I can carry you with one arm."

"My ankle's not that bad. Not even a sprain." She might be protesting, but at the same time, she snuggles into my chest and rests her head on my shoulder.

"Good. But I'm carrying you anyway." Nothing has ever felt more right.

"We can't hold hands this way," she argues, a smile in her voice.

I squeeze her thigh to remind her that we have a lot more contact now. "This is an upgrade."

"Okay, but you'll have to come in for a drink or something. My way of saying thank you." The scent of her arousal spikes as she offers the invitation. I have a feeling my little mate wants to share more than a cocktail. She has no idea that I'm completely at her mercy. Anything she wants, I'll do.

“Deal.” I push open her creaky gate and make my way to the door. I don’t want to put her down yet, so I ask, “Keys?”

“Oh, use the code. It’s Radar’s birthday.”

My head automatically snaps around, scanning for Tristan. Is he within earshot? Given his obsession with her, I don’t want him knowing how to access her house. “You shouldn’t give out your door code to people.”

“I know. I don’t. I trust you, Zed. Anyway, you’re leaving town. I only have to worry about you for a few days, right?” She giggles at her own joke, but I don’t.

Juggling the leash and her shoes, I punch in the code. “Change it after I leave tonight, okay?”

“Or you could just stay over.” Her voice is teasing, but it’s the second time she’s suggested it, so I give her a little bit of truth as I carry her inside.

“I might do that if I’m invited. Where should I put you?” I scan for a comfortable landing pad. Her entry leads right to a cozy living room, where a worn leather sofa is flanked by a jungle of houseplants and a side table stacked with books. “Sofa?”

“Bed,” she says, gesturing down the short hallway. She immediately blushes. “My TV is in there. I thought we could watch a movie? But we don’t have to if you need to get up early for your conference.”

As if I’d pass up a night with her for any reason. “Sleep is for the weak.”

She laughs. “As long as you won’t regret it tomorrow.”

I would never regret a single second spent with my alokoi. Especially not a second

spent in her bedroom.

It smells like her. Of course it does. It's drenched in her. I try and hide my desperate deep breaths of her scent as I deposit her in the center of the bed. She scoots to the edge of the mattress and swings her legs down to the floor, testing her ankle.

I stop her before she stands up. "What can I get you? Drink of water? Pillow under your foot? Whatever you need."

"Uh...unless you can pee for me, I think I'm on my own for this one." She smirks at me, and all I want to do is kiss it off her face. So I grab her chin and tip her face up to mine, devouring her mouth to let her know she's never on her own. She whimpers, giving in for a few delicious seconds before she pushes my chest. "Sorry, I really need to go. If you don't mind giving Radar some water before I put him to bed, his clean bowl is in the dishwasher. You can grab us a couple beers from the fridge on your way back."

She limps to the bathroom while I turn my attention to the dachshund, who has flopped on the floor. Poor old guy must be worn out after the meat-stravaganza and long walk. "Come on, buddy, water time," I say, giving the leash a gentle tug to let him know he should follow me.

Radar grudgingly gets to his feet, trundling down the hallway, through the cozy living room, to the kitchen, where I unsnap his leash.

The kitchen is just as cute and cheerful as her bohemian bedroom, with vintage yellow tile and a dachshund theme. There are dachshunds chasing butterflies on the wallpaper border. Dachshunds with bows around their necks on the canisters. A dachshund in a hot dog costume pinned on the corkboard.

"Oh, that's you," I say, grinning as I lean closer to soak in the details of what must be

Radar's most recent Halloween costume. Next to it is a picture of Cari wearing a yellow witch hat and a matching mini dress that says "spicy" on the front. Spicy yellow witch? What?

Then the joke sinks in... it's not a witch hat. It's a condiment cap. She's spicy mustard. Of course she is. It's a couple costume with the dog's wiener suit.

I laugh out loud, startling Radar, who yips and scrabbles on the slick tile floor until he crashes into a cabinet. I wince at the impact. The cabinet door pops open, spilling out a half-dozen pots and pans that clang and rattle all over the floor, startling him even more.

Before I can grab him, he darts away from the clamor, straight toward the bistro set at the opposite end of the small kitchen, where he gets tangled in the chair legs. One of the chairs tips backward, straight toward a bookcase full of houseplants near the sliding glass door!

It's like everything shifts into slow motion. I lunge for the chair, hoping to stop it before it topples all the delicate plants to the floor. At the same time, I curl my tail around Radar, slowing his zany zig-zags and cushioning his tiny body against any more collisions.

The chair, dog, and I land in a pile with a thud , but thankfully Radar and the plants are fine. I breathe a huge sigh of relief. I don't want our first date to be another disaster.

"Everything okay?" Cari calls worriedly from the bathroom.

"YEP! All good!" I shout back, quickly picking myself up from the floor and setting the chair upright. I gather all the pots and pans and stack them back in the cupboard. Then I pull open the dishwasher to locate Radar's water bowl.

I almost swallow my tongue when I see what's in the top rack.

It's a bright-red double dildo, both members pointing the same direction, like they're the top of a letter "F" that stands for fuck me . Because it's a double dragon dildo, with two big, textured cocks that look a whole lot like mine. This is what Cari uses when she's by herself and needs satisfaction. And judging by its current location in the dishwasher, she needed it last night. After she ran into me .

My feral form instantly takes it as a compliment. Swelled up with pride, he tries to half-shift.

No , I tell him sternly, even as my pants get tighter. Just because she likes to use two dragon dicks doesn't mean she wants to see them right now. Thank gods, he listens, for once. We can't ruin this again by losing control.

Mate , he agrees.

I grab Radar's water dish from the bottom rack and fill it up. He drinks thirstily, and by the time I grab an ice pack from the freezer, tuck two beers under my arm, and lead Radar back to the bedroom, Cari is sitting on the edge of the bed, her entire face as red as the dildo in the dishwasher.

"Did you see...? I just remembered what else is in there." She presses her hands to her cheeks, hiccupping a hysterical giggle. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shock you."

"I'm not shocked. I'm—" I break off, shaking my head.

"Horried? Horny? What? Tell me what's going through your head so I don't overthink it," she begs.

"Hopeful. And yeah, horny." I laugh and she does, too. "Don't worry, I didn't read

too much into it.”

Mate , my feral form purrs. He read everything into it.

“Okay, good,” she says, rising and taking Radar’s leash from my hand. She limps to a crate set up in one corner of the room and coaxes him into it, patting him lovingly before closing the door. “Good boy. Night night.”

“How’s your ankle?” I ask when she turns back toward me.

“Not too bad.” She grimaces when she makes the few steps to the bed, though.

“Here, let me ice you.” I hold up the ice pack I brought from the kitchen, wrapped in a clean towel.

“It’s not that serious,” she protests. “It’s not like I’m running a marathon this week. I can sit down at work.”

“Humor me. I want to dance with you at the gala on Friday.”

“Can’t really argue with that, can I?” She flashes me a bright grin and pats the mattress, inviting me into her bed. A moment I’ve imagined a thousand times at least, and still, the real thing tops all the fantasies.

Sliding in next to her, I carefully rearrange her limbs so her feet are in my lap. Gods, they’re so tiny and cute compared to my huge, clawed hands. Gingerly, I examine her injured ankle, afraid to hurt her. It’s not visibly bruised or swollen, just a red mark from the strap, but I put the ice on it anyway, careful to keep a layer of the towel between the frozen compress and her skin.

“Ahhh, cold!” she yelps, but she doesn’t pull away, just squirms, her feet rubbing

against the single, half-hard cock in my pants. If she doesn't stop that, it's going to be impossible to keep my shift in check.

Desperate to preserve the moment, I hold her feet still, stroking her calf soothingly with my thumb. Her skin is so damn soft. I want to taste it. What would she do if I licked her right now?

This train of thought is not helping my dick situation. Even with my shift wrangled, my single cock swells under her feet.

"Oh!" she bursts out, eyes on my lap. "I'm sorry! I didn't—I wouldn't—I mean I would, but not without asking you first."

"You would...what?" I croak, not daring to let my own imagination answer the question.

"Um...touch you there. With my feet. Or my hands. Or whatever other part you wanted me to. Not that you want me to! I just meant I am not opposed to touching you on purpose, even though that was an accident. You know what? I'm going to stalk topping now. Stop talking now, I mean." She shuts her eyes and leans back against the headboard with a groan.

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Cari

I 'm so hot. Despite the ice wrapped around my ankle, my face is flaming, my palms are sweating, and my pussy is melting. Nothing like sticking your foot in your mouth while simultaneously using that foot to knead your date's dick like a kittycat.

Zed's huge hands circle my ankles. I expect him to lift my trespassing feet off his lap, but he does the opposite, gently pressing them down so the huge bar of his erection is notched into my arches. "Feel that? You're killing me, Cari. I'm out of my mind."

"Me too," I admit, unable to stop myself from exploring his hardness with my toes. It's the dick I've been dreaming of. I can feel the ridges through his khakis, and all I can think about is how they're going to feel inside me. "Since I ran into you yesterday, I'm like...burning up. Like fifteen years of wanting you has hit me all at once."

"Yeah," he agrees, voice gravelly. "Something unlocked. It feels..."

"Nice," I finish.

"Understatement of the decade," he murmurs, stroking the tops of my feet.

Why is that simple gesture so meaningful? I'm melting under his fingers. Literally turning into liquid. My panties are soaked, and he's touching my feet . "Why does this feel so good ?"

He chuckles, his cock swelling even more under my soles. "For you, too, huh? Do

you remember the time during senior year that Radar tangled you up in the leash and I had to take off your sneakers?"

"Yes, oh my gosh." I giggle at the memory. "I was so worried my feet smelled."

"They smelled amazing. I wanted to lick between your toes." His confession ends in a growl, and he clears his throat, sounding embarrassed. "I think I imprinted on your feet or something, because I'm a little obsessed with them. They're so pretty. So tiny."

I laugh. "I wear size nine. Sometimes ten!"

He snorts. "I wear size twenty-three."

Point taken. Everything about him is big. His body. His personality. The way he makes me feel. My heart lurches. So stupid to think that I'll be fine once he goes back to Apple Grove. I'm going to be a disaster. But I'll be a disaster whether we sleep together or not, so I'm not going to cheat myself out of this, damn it!

"Still want to lick them?" I ask, wiggling my feet in his lap.

In answer, he lifts the ankle still wrapped in the icepack and curves his body to slide his long tongue between my toes. It's the most delicious tickle that reaches all the way into my belly, like he's found a direct line to my clit. Plus, his position thrusts his cock up against my other foot.

I rub against it while he circles my toes, both of us already panting. Then he pulls my big toe into his mouth and sucks on it, his tongue still working to find all my exquisitely sensitive nerves. Oh my god, it feels good. Ticklish, but good.

I collapse backwards, pulling a pillow over my face, but he tugs it away.

“Let me see you. Please.”

How can I say no to that? He’s so earnest. So eager. So...hot.

I lean back and watch him, his golden eyes glinting every time they flick to my face. In between playful nips, his tongue circles each toe, paying them more attention than most of my previous partners paid my whole body...and the rest of my body is very aware.

My pussy clenches, begging for his touch, and I subtly squeeze my thighs together to tide it over, inadvertently pressing harder on his cock with my free foot.

“Is this one getting jealous?” he murmurs, carefully putting down my injured ankle and switching to my left foot. He takes my big toe into his mouth and sucks, harder this time, sending a bolt of pleasure right to my core.

I moan, dropping my head back and closing my eyes. I’ve never had my feet played with like this before. Now I know how much I was missing out! I doubt anyone could do it as well as Zed, though.

When he finishes spoiling my toes, he licks his way up my instep. He runs his tongue along the sensitive skin there, making me quiver and giggle.

“Too ticklish?” he asks.

“Just-right ticklish.”

He laughs, the sound coming from deep in his chest. It rumbles through his body and mine at our points of contact, turning me on even more.

“I think it’s been long enough.” He removes the ice pack from my right foot and sets

it aside. Then he takes my entire foot into his mouth! He grins around it when I squeak in surprise, his teeth scraping lightly over my ankle. The furnace of his mouth in contrast with my still-chilled skin sends waves of pleasure up my leg, making me squirm.

He's thorough, massaging every inch of my foot with his tongue before giving my other foot the same treatment.

I know this is just a fling while he's in town, but the way he looks at me, like I'm the most delicious thing he's ever tasted, makes me feel special. Like I'm not just a girl he knew in high school.

"Zed, I want more." He doesn't have to know the double meaning: That I want more of his touch, more of his tongue, but also more of him. More of his heart. It's enough that he immediately shifts so he's positioned between my legs, facing me. Before he even touches me, my pussy's getting wetter by the second, and I can feel my clit swelling.

He takes his time, licking and nibbling around my ankles until I'm begging him to move higher. And when he finally does, I feel like I might come just from his breath on my skin.

He kisses the top of my foot, then runs his tongue along the side. And then he reaches the spot where my ankle meets my calf. He licks it, long and slow like it's soft-serve ice cream, and I moan so loud I'm sure the whole neighborhood can hear.

His tail swipes around my uninjured ankle, holding my leg in place as he starts to kiss his way up my calf. He's taking his sweet time, and I'm not sure how much longer I can wait.

"Hurry up," I whine.

Zed lifts his head, chuckling. “I promise it’ll be worth the wait.”

“I’ve been waiting fifteen years. Isn’t that long enough?”

He laughs and pauses, teasing the back of my knee. It’s especially sensitive, making goosebumps raise all over my skin. He notices, skimming his claws over them, and that’s when he really goes for it.

He licks up the inside of my leg, making my skirt puff with every hot breath. He wedges his snout between my thighs and oh-so-delicately nips the edge of my panty elastic, pulling it aside.

And then, oh my fucking god, he slides his strong, slick tongue between my folds. It feels like a wet, warm flame dancing over my sensitive flesh, setting me on fire.

“You like that?” he rumbles without lifting his head, the vibration of his deep voice buzzing through my core, making it clench.

I make a garbled noise of agreement. I can’t even form words.

His claws make short work of the few strings holding my panties together. “You taste incredible.”

“So do you,” I slur, sounding drunk. “That’s not right. Feels incredible. No, wait. You prob’ly taste incredi— oh .” He frictions his tongue against the side of my clit, and I break off. I feel him smile against my pussy. His tail wraps around my good ankle, and then he dives back in.

His tongue is everywhere, licking and flicking, swirling around my clit like he’s trying to taste my soul. But I think my soul has left my body...it’s in heaven right now.

I arch off the bed, body bowing under his focused attention. It's so good. So perfect. So intense. Everything I dreamed about. Fifteen years of wanting draws my muscles tight with anticipation.

I'm so close. So close. I bite my lip, willing my body to let go, let me slide into the abyss of pleasure that I know is coming.

But even though what Zed's doing to me is elite, and every teasing glide carrying me to a point that approaches ecstasy, I can't quite get there. My brain keeps reminding me that I don't want this to end. Once he leaves this bedroom, this house, he's going to walk outside into someone else's destiny.

Why can't I get out of my head?!

My enjoyment ticks down as my clit gets overstimulated and starts to lose sensation. A little growl of frustration slides out of me, and Zed pauses, lifting his head to check on me.

"Everything okay?"

I avoid his eyes, fixing them on the framed botanical print on the wall behind him. "I'm sorry it's taking so long. Your neck is probably getting tired."

"Cari, what are you talking about?"

"Maybe we should just skip ahead and do it? Come up here." I tug on his shoulders. Maybe I can fill up the hole that just opened inside me with some dragon dick. But I don't think even two of Zed's huge dicks could fill the hollow space that's suddenly appeared.

Damn it, is that a tear leaking out?

I swipe it away, closing my fist around the evidence. But he sees it anyway. Grabs my fist and peels it open, licking away the drop of moisture in my palm.

He tilts his head to the side. “Hm. Sadness. Not my favorite flavor.”

I sniffle and give a soggy laugh. When I don’t say anything else after a few seconds, he pokes me gently in the thigh.

“You’re supposed to ask me what my favorite flavor is.”

“What’s your favorite flavor?” I whisper, already knowing what he’s going to say.

“This pretty pussy.” As if to prove it, he dips his head to sample between my thighs again. The short break has allowed my clit to recover full sensation, and this tongue feels just as good as the first time.

“Ohhh,” I gasp, my head falling back into the pillows.

“That’s right,” he murmurs. “I’d do this all day if you’d let me. All night, too.”

I hiccup a hysterical giggle, picturing it. “That’d be harder than holding hands.”

At that reminder, he reaches up with one hand and grabs mine, squeezing softly. My muscles relax at the reassurance, and a warm rush of pleasure floods through me. Our joined hands pull me out of our guaranteed future-disaster and back into the right-now perfection.

We stay that way, fingers tangled, as Zed sets a rhythm of stroke and swirl that has me shaking and whimpering, begging him for more, right there. Now . And when he bites off his claw and slides a finger inside, I come so hard I see stars.

But he's not done. He keeps going, pushing me on, his tongue and finger working in tandem. My pleasure barely dips, my clit screaming for more.

"Again," he orders, his voice low and gruff.

So I do.

I come again, one hand hanging onto his and the other gripping his horn for dear life as a second orgasm in a row rattles my teeth.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Zed

Cari's so soft after she comes. Like a woman-shaped marshmallow, smiling at me. Even the pulsing of her pussy around my fingers is soft and adorable.

"I can't move," she says, giggling. "You removed all my bones."

"Good." This is how it should be. My mate's scent on my chin, her body clutching mine in multiple places. The only thing better would be if my seed was inside her. My cock rubs against the edge of the mattress as I imagine filling her up until she overflows.

"Take your clothes off. Do a little dance. Entertain me while I get the feeling in my toes back," she says, lips curving as she shakes our joined hands in a funny motion.

My smile turns into a frown. "Are they asleep? Did my tail squeeze you too tight?" I grab her foot and start rubbing it, but she wriggles out of my grip.

"You just made 'em curl so hard they lost their blood supply and fainted."

I crack up. "That's not a thing."

She blinks big round eyes at me, poking her lower lip out. "It is. I swear on my veterinary license. Skeletal muscle contraction can cause vasoconstriction, which can cause hypoxia. Hypoxia causes fainting. Ergo, that's what my toes just did." She giggles at her own joke. That's my Cari, happy and bright as her favorite sunflowers. She went away there for a second, and it worried me.

“Big words from someone who couldn’t form complete sentences a few minutes ago.” I use the finger still inside her to stroke her inner walls, finding the spot that makes her moan. I rub it, gratified when she tries to clamp her legs around me, her hand clutching mine so tight it feels like my bones will crack. “Why’d you bail on me in the middle, love?”

“I don’t know. Didn’t”—she pants and whines, grinding into my finger before drawing a deep breath—“want it to end. Didn’t want you to go—ohhhhh.” Liquid gushes over my hand, soaking the sheets underneath her.

Mate , my feral form grows approvingly. We were so in sync, pleasing our girl, I almost forgot he was there.

“Ahh, I’m so sorry!” Cari bursts out. “That doesn’t usually happen. Only certain toys. I would have put down a towel if I thought you’d be that good. I mean of course I thought you would be good. I didn’t think you’d be bad. You’re amazing. I meant...it’s never that good. Only you.”

“Only you,” I agree, grinning. I love it when she babbles. “I need you, Cari. Now.”

“Kay. Still can’t move, though.”

“I’ll do everything.” I can’t let go of her, so I fumble my pants open left-handed. My dick is heavy and hot as it slaps against her thigh, drooling pearlescent pre-cum.

“Wait.” My boneless bride-to-be props up on her elbows. “Only one?”

“I don’t have two unless I shift.” I grasp my shaft and use it to bump the ridges over her clit. Her eyes roll back in her head. “I think one is gonna fill you up just fine.”

“What if I want two?”

My cock jerks in my hand as my feral form tries to push the shift. “I need a reason for you to come back for seconds. We’ll see how you do taking this one, pretty little human, and maybe you’ll get two next time.”

“Do I get three the third time?” she asks, grinning giddily up at me. Brat. I love that she feels safe enough with me to brat a little, though. And that she’s thinking of us together in the future. I really love that.

I nudge the head against her opening, stretching it slightly without pushing all the way in. My feral form answers through my mouth, his voice a possessive snarl. “You can have them in every hole, as many times as you want. But nobody else is touching you.”

She shudders beneath me as I sink inside her. She’s so wet that my ridges don’t catch on her snug opening, just slide right in. She stretches to fit me exactly, like a tailor-made glove.

Of course, she’s perfect for me. She’s mine. She’s always been mine.

With our joined hands, I pin her arm above her head and brace over her. I keep my hips still, enjoying the feel of her body clasping mine. “I missed this. Always been missing it.”

“Knew it would be good.” She bites her lip, her hips levering up to take more of me, if there were any more to take. I’m glad, because next time I’ll give her more. I’ll give her as much as she can handle.

“Look at you, starving for my cock,” I tease. “How did you live without it for so long?”

She giggles, her free hand roaming over my chest. “I made do with poor substitutes.”

“Oh, I know,” I growl, remembering the sucker-punch of lust that hit me when I saw her toys in the dishwasher. She laughs again, her core squeezing me, and I can’t wait any longer. “Tell me if it’s too much.”

I let myself off the leash. Let my feral needs surge. I rut into her with efficient strokes that have one all-encompassing purpose: to claim her, seed her, and make her mine. And Cari takes every one, her cheeks reddening and pupils darkening, mouth going slack with pleasure.

Gods, it’s too much for me, even if it’s not for her.

My balls tighten, threatening to end this. I’m dying to come, every instinct in me to fill her up, but I want her to come again first. I want to feel her squeeze around me and lose herself completely.

“Think you can come on my cock, sunflower? Do you have another one in you?”

“Yeah,” she pants, breath short.

Her pussy clenches around my cock like a hot, wet fist, and I can feel her climbing closer and closer, chasing her peak. I want it. I need it. My feral form is roaring for it, demanding her satisfaction.

She reaches down, wedging her hand between us to rub her clit. Her walls tighten even more, and she moans, her heels digging into the back of my thighs. I don’t stop, I can’t. She feels so good that I’m afraid to lose her. Afraid she might slip through my fingers still.

Her eyes lock onto mine, and I see the question in them, the need for permission to let go. I curl down to kiss her, licking into her mouth. That’s all it takes; she clings to me, shattering, her pussy clamping down around my cock, milking me as I swallow

her scream.

Her pulses set me off immediately, my rhythm turning jerky and desperate as I'm overwhelmed by my own orgasm. Gods, gods, this is my mate. My alokoi. My everything. With white-hot bursts, my seed spills into her, filling her up until she overflows.

As it should be. As it will be, always.

I pull out and watch with satisfaction as my cum pours out of her and pools, adding to the wet spot on the sheets. The beast inside of me is satisfied, but I'm not. I want more of Cari, all of her, every part of her. And she knows it. She looks up at me, her eyes glazed, her chest heaving as she tries to catch her breath.

"Again?" I growl, my cock already swelling, and she nods, her legs falling open in silent invitation. "No words left, huh, pretty girl?"

She shakes her head, a soft smile quirking one side of her mouth.

This time, I take it slow, savoring every sensation as I sink back into her. She's even softer now, more pliant, her body still shivering with the aftershocks. I lean down and kiss her again since she liked it so much the last time, my tongue delving into her mouth as my cock delves into her pussy. She tastes like me, like us, and I want to devour her whole.

She moans into the kiss, arching up to meet me, her hips rolling in an involuntary plea.

I give her what she's asking for, sliding in and out of her with long, languid strokes that make her whimper. Her free hand clutches at my shoulder, her nails digging into my scales.

Our kiss deepens, our tongues tangling as we move together, our bodies in perfect sync. She's mine. Finally, utterly, completely mine. And the knowledge fills me with a fierce, possessive pride.

"I'm gonna—" she whispers in between kisses.

I pull back slightly, needing to see her face as she comes again. Her eyes squeeze shut, her mouth open in a silent scream, her body taut with pleasure.

My feral form roars with victory, and I can't stop him this time—he forces the half-shift through. Cari gasps as my cock grows even larger inside her, the deeper ridges of its new form rubbing her interior walls, my lower cock sliding against the crack of her ass. But she doesn't pull away. She doesn't flinch. Instead, she wraps her legs around my waist, urging me closer, deeper.

Her body stretches effortlessly to accommodate the new shape, and when she squeezes me with her internal muscles, both my cocks come in pulses so powerful, they're almost painful. They go on and on, wracking my muscles as I struggle to keep my weight off her.

Finally, when I'm drained and breathless, I start to roll off.

Her arm hooks around my neck. "Not letting you go," she mumbles.

I kiss her tenderly, running my claws through her short, silky hair that's still styled with my cum. "We need to clean up. I don't want you lying in a puddle."

Her little feet dig into me a little deeper, fingers squeezing mine. "No. Don't wanna move."

I huff a laugh. "I thought I fucked all the brat out of you earlier."

“Got to keep you coming back for seconds,” she deadpans, throwing my words back at me. Then her face changes, humor slipping away, and she lifts our joined hands, her little pink fingers twined with my red scaly ones. “Don’t make me let go of you yet.”

“Never.” I gather her up like an armful of flowers and roll over, depositing her limp body on top of me. It’s time to tell her that we’re forever.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Zed

Cari sighs happily, resting her cheek against my chest. “I don’t want you lying in a puddle, either. Cleanup towels are in the nightstand drawer, if you can reach them.”

I fumble to my left and pull open the first drawer that I find, grabbing the fabric on top. Cari jolts on top of me, every muscle tense.

“Not that one! Sorry!” She breaks our handhold and crawls off me with superhuman speed to snatch whatever-it-is out of my hand. She throws it into the drawer and slams it shut. When she turns to face me again, her face is pale and her chest is heaving. “Sorry,” she repeats, blinking back welling tears. “I meant the top drawer.”

“I’m sorry, too,” I say, completely confused.

She shakes her head as she pulls cleanup cloths from the correct drawer and hands one to me. “You didn’t do anything. It’s not your fault.”

Ignoring the mess for now, I prop on my elbow to cup her cheek. “What’s wrong, then? Tell me, sunflower, so I can fix it.”

“This isn’t something you can fix. I mean it’s fixed, I think. Remember I told you I had a stalker? He hasn’t contacted me since I moved here. That drawer is just...stuff he’s sent. I don’t even know why I keep it.”

She’s twisting her hands and looking miserable, eyes everywhere but me. Not what I wanted to see right after I made her come a half-dozen times.

“I take that back. I do know why. I look at it sometimes to remind myself—” she breaks off, her expression so broken that I can't resist pulling her back into my arms so we're lying on our sides facing each other. She curls toward me like a sad little shrimp.

I bury my fingers in her hair, massaging lightly, and kiss the top of her head. “Remind yourself what?” I prompt.

“That I'm not safe,” she whispers into the dark hollow between us. “That he might still be watching.”

Shit. Fuck. Damn.

She's not okay. I can't tell her about how I've been stalking her. Not until she's sure about my place in her life. I have to show her that I respect her. That I'd never cross her boundaries like that. That if she wanted me to stay away from her, I would.

Well, I'd try. I'd test the limits of my ability. I wouldn't fucking scare her and leave creepy bullshit on her porch. I'd stay where she couldn't see me and only look at her through the window.

Fuck me. This is why I can't tell her. I'm not better than him. Not really.

I hug her tight, so every part of her body is pressed against mine, then lace our fingers together again. “You are safe. I won't let anyone hurt you.”

She relaxes against me. Then I feel her stomach jump and hear her giggle a moment later. “This is a really bad wet spot.”

“Whose fault is that?” I snicker.

“Yours!” she burst out. She pokes me. “You made me do it. It’s your fault. Admit it.”

My chest swells a little at the credit. I did make her come five times. Or maybe six. I lost count. “Fine. My fault. Let’s change the sheets before we fall asleep.”

Laughing, naked, still holding hands, we work together to strip and remake the bed, take a quick, kiss-drenched shower, and brush our teeth.

Our hands are still clasped when I wake up in the morning in Cari’s sunny bedroom, the shadows of her houseplants waving against the ceiling.

“Morning, beautiful,” I murmur when Cari’s eyes open at my movements.

She sits upright. “What time is it?”

“I don’t know. Seven-thirty, eight?” I roll over halfway to look at my phone. “Eight-twenty.”

She squeaks and tumbles off the bed in her hurry to get out of it, releasing her hold on me in the process. “I’m late. Crap. Can you call Cynthia and tell her I’m on my way?” She rattles off the number to her clinic as she rummages through her closet, pulling out fresh scrubs.

I pretend to enter the number even though I already have it saved, then call her clinic on speakerphone. When the line picks up, I recognize the voice of Cari’s red-haired receptionist in the greeting.

“Hey. It’s Zed Glisson, the dragon you met yesterday. Cari asked me to call and tell you she’s on her way.”

“Oh, did she?” Cynthia asks dryly. “And what should I tell her waiting patients?”

I lift my brows at Cari, who's tying the waist drawstring of her pants. She shrugs at me and mouths make something up. I decide on a half-truth. "Um, she's moving a little slow because she twisted her ankle yesterday."

"Is that what you kids are calling it?" Cynthia snickers. "Alrighty then. I'll say her ankle's reaaalll sore. Tell her to hurry her cute little butt down here. I know she hasn't left yet." She hangs up, and Cari groans.

"I'm going to be hearing about this all day," she says, shaking her head.

"Maybe your cute little butt should call in sick and spend the day with me."

She sighs, but she's smiling. "Can't. Wish I could, but I have a full schedule. We don't want the Karfani family's cockapoo's itchy ears to go untreated, do we? Anyway, you have your conference thing. You can't miss that."

I can, but how can I say that without giving myself away? Gods, she's lovely with the light shining in her hair. I want to hoard her for myself, but her job is important. A lot of people (and other animals) are depending on her. "Definitely not. How's your ankle, though? Should I carry you to work? I think I'm going to skip out on the conference stuff today, anyway. I'm a little burned out on PowerPoint presentations."

She tests her ankle and pronounces it fine as she's scraping her hair back into an adorably stubby half-ponytail. "I'm good to walk."

"Have breakfast with me?" My chest aches at the thought of being apart for her for a whole day. Our night together has definitely deepened the alokoi bond.

"I'll grab something at work. I've gotta run. You should stay in bed, though. Stay as long as you want." Cari pauses, frowning. "I know this is a huge favor, but since you're not working, do you mind keeping Radar for the day? That way he'll get

enough exercise that it'll wear him out, and he'll just sleep through the whole gala tonight. It's black tie so I don't want him acting wild. Wait, did I tell you that you need a tux? You need a tux."

"I figured since Radar's wearing a bow tie, I should, too. The little guy and I can get dressed together."

She pauses to flash a grateful smile. "I have a hair appointment after work so I'll meet you guys at the venue, okay? Radar's bowtie is in his toy basket. Call me if you can't find it."

"Okay." I'll agree to anything and everything she asks. I'd wear an inflatable baby costume and babysit her pet velociraptor if she wanted me to.

I'm still drunk on her proximity. Her beauty. Her amazing, adorable mind. I should tell her how incredible she is. How I can't believe we're finally together again, and that we fit together even better than my fantasies.

That's not weird to say, is it? I'm so obsessed with her that I can't even remember what's normal or not.

I open my mouth, but she's already halfway down the hall when I finish my sentence. The second I hear the front door close behind her, I roll over and open the forbidden drawer.

That fabric I grabbed? It's a pair of panties with the crotch cut out.

A chill lifts the scales on my spine. Underneath them is a crude doll made of sticks, with yellow, dried-grass hair. Tied to its stick-neck is a piece of twine with one dangling end. It's obviously supposed to be Cari.

Mate , my feral form growls, poised to shift and destroy whoever tormented her with this bullshit. I remind him that taking the roof off her cottage isn't going to win any points, and he settles down, but we're both uneasy.

I set the doll aside, feeling sick. A note underneath says in jagged, blocky letters, "You'll love me in time. I don't care how long it takes." My claws pierce the paper before I realize what's happening. The rest of the drawer is a mess of paper scraps with scrawled messages, painted rocks, dried flowers and leaves, and—maybe most ominously—flash drives. A lot of them.

I don't know what's on them, but I definitely shouldn't have let Cari walk to work alone. Grabbing my phone, I redial the clinic.

"Miss her already, loverboy?" Cynthia snarks.

"Is she there?" I ask tightly.

"Just walked through the door on two good ankles. You want to talk to her? It's your dragon, honey." Cynthia doesn't wait for my answer to hand the phone over.

"Hey," Cari says into the phone. My racing heart calms a little. "What do you need? Is Radar being a butthead?"

"We're fine. Just wanted to make sure you got there okay."

"Aw." Her voice warms. "You're sweet. I'm good."

"Good." I clear my throat, not wanting to transmit any of the panic I felt until I heard her voice. "See you later. Don't forget to eat something."

I end the call furious with myself. Why did I need to hold the threats in my own

hands to fully understand the danger she's been in? Why didn't I just take her word for it? I mean, I believed her. But I didn't feel the true depth of her fear until now. I'm a fucking idiot for letting her walk alone, especially without Radar!

She deserves better from her mate. I'm going to give her better.

I snap into action. Throwing on yesterday's clothes and twisting my hair up off my ears, I let the dog out of his crate and do my best to clean up the house from our activities.

Humming cheesy pop songs about love, I make the bed and throw last night's dirty sheets in the laundry. I feed Radar his breakfast while I make coffee and unload the dishwasher. I locate a travel mug and take him out for a long trot around the park while I caffeinate. I'm so hopped up on my alokoi's scent, it's like the blue sky and the birdsong is just for me.

"Beautiful morning to stretch our legs, isn't it, little guy?" I ask Radar when he stops to pee on a tree.

"Ugh! What the fuck, dude?"

Oops. Not a tree. On closer look, it's Gabe. All six-foot-six hairy inches of him.

"What are you doing here?!"

He rolls his eyes, puffing away his forelock. "What do you think? Saving you from yourself, as usual. I came out on the first flight I could get. I'm worried about you."

Aw. He really cares. My full heart overflows, and I throw my arms around Gabe. "Thanks, man. Seems like I don't need saving this time, though. I told you, this is the real deal."

“Okay, bud.” He pats my back, indicating it’s time to let go. I give him one last bear hug and release him, grinning.

“You remember Radar?”

“How could I forget?” Gabe wrinkles his nose at the wet streak in his fur that begins mid-calf, where the evidence of Radar’s potty break is still trickling down his leg.

“Not my fault you’re so good at camouflage,” I joke, and he gives a grudging laugh. “I’m watching him for Cari while she’s at work. We had an amazing date,” I add as we fall into step, headed in the direction of the hotel. “I need to update my spreadsheet.”

Need to record everything I know about her now. The way she likes to be touched. The way she sounds. The way she tastes.

Gabe makes a noncommittal noise, dragging his small, wheeled carryon behind us. “Fine. Hey, is it okay if I crash with you? All the hotels are full because of some event.”

“Oh, sure. There’s a big charity thing tonight. I’m going with Cari, actually. Want to help me find something to wear? I need a tux.”

Gabe snorts. “Since when are you a tux guy? All you own are jeans and khakis.”

“Since my mate invited me to a black-tie event. Anyway, I also have cargo pants—”

“Those are khakis with extra pockets,” Gabe interrupts.

“And a pair of corduroys.”

“Jeans with different fabric.”

“Jeans with different fabric are different kinds of pants,” I shoot back, feeling a little defensive of my basic style. Nothing wrong with my jeans and T-shirts! I want to look nice for Cari tonight, though. I nudge him with my elbow. “I just need to find some ‘jeans’ with fancy fabric that fit and have a tail hole.”

“They’re not going to let you in the tux shop with that dog,” Gabe warns, ever the pessimist.

“Perfect,” I say. “You can stand outside and hold the leash.”

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Cari

I 'm buzzing all through the workday, despite the late start that throws my schedule into chaos. My heart is buzzing, my mind is buzzing, and most of all, my thoroughly satisfied pussy is buzzing.

Six orgasms in one session?! At that rate, we're going to make up for fifteen years apart pretty quickly. Maybe I can convince him to stay an extra week after his conference is over. He seems just as into this as I am. I wouldn't be surprised if we can keep it going long distance.

Unless he finds his mate , that poky little voice reminds me.

That's enough thinking about that. Time to clean out some cockapoo earwax.

Even though it's nonstop-busy for the next few hours, I'm energized at the end of the day. It makes me feel a little guilty, but the break from Radar helped. I didn't realize how much time and mental effort I devote to making sure he has what he needs until I spend a stretch apart from him. He's always needed a little extra, and now that he's elderly, he needs even more.

I feel so lucky to have him in my life, and I love him so much, but I guess I've gotten a little bit of caretaker fatigue and didn't recognize it. I'll have to give Zed an extra thank-you kiss when I see him.

I say goodbye to Cynthia and head out with my dress in a garment bag over one arm and a pair of heels looped on the other. The salon isn't far, and then I'll take a cab to

the gala. But I don't get two steps across the parking lot when a sleek limo pulls up.

The back window purrs down. "Need a ride?" Tristan asks. He's already dressed in an impeccable white tuxedo that makes him look like a young James Bond. "I think we're headed the same way."

I lift my shoes up. "Gotta get my hair done first. I'm getting dressed at the salon. I'll see you later, though!"

The door opens and a hand beckons me into the limo. "Come on, I'll take you," Tristan urges smoothly. "Friends don't let friends walk alone."

I roll my eyes and get in. "It's only two blocks."

"I'll enjoy your company for two blocks, then," Tristan says comfortably, his arm propped behind me on the back of the seat. Then he frowns. "Where's the dog?"

"Radar's hanging out with Zed. It's a relief, honestly. I worry about him so much. It's nice to have someone I trust on dog-sitting duty so I can relax a little bit. They're going to meet me at the venue later."

Something sparks in Tristan's eyes. "Let's get you nice and relaxed, then. Where's your little salon?"

I give the address, and we're there in about ninety seconds. Tristan helps me out of the limo, and everyone on the sidewalk stares at me like I'm a celebrity and not in my scrubs and covered with vet-sweat. They're probably looking at Tristan, anyway, who could have walked off a movie set. Somehow, even with Impy at home, he doesn't have a single cat hair on him.

He follows me into the salon. My hair gal, Tanya, waves at us and pats her chair, her

bleached-and-pink ponytail swishing behind her. “Got your spot right here, babe!”

“Do you have spa facilities at this establishment?” Tristan asks smoothly. I see the minute that Tanya notices him. Her eyes go dreamy, and she starts fussing with her curtain bangs.

“We offer all kinds of services,” she answers, her voice sultry. Then, seeming to hear the suggestiveness in her own words, she snaps out of it. “I mean, yes! We offer facials, massage, waxing, mani-pedis, soaks, you name it. Are you interested in booking, Mr...?”

“Just Tristan,” he says, winning her over even more. “I’m very interested in booking one of everything for Caroline. We want her feeling her best for the gala tonight.”

My jaw drops at the same time that Tanya’s eyes go wide. “Right now? I’m not sure we have any openings right this minute, Mr....uh, Tristan. But I’ll make sure she looks gorgeous.”

His handsome face hardens as he pulls a money clip out of his inner jacket pocket. “I didn’t say anything about how she looks. I want her to feel her best. How much?” He starts peeling off bills.

“F-for what?” Tanya stammers, trading bewildered looks with me.

“To cancel the other appointments.”

She moves closer and lowers her voice. “The clients are already here. They’re already getting their treatments.”

“How. Much,” Tristan repeats, enunciating like she’s stupid. As sweet as his gesture is, I don’t like that he’s talking to her like that.

“It’s really okay,” I tell him. “There’s not time to do all those things, anyway. I’m fine with the hair and makeup I already booked.”

“Ten thousand dollars and we’ll have her done on time,” Tanya blurts out, giving me the wide-eyed shut up, bitch, you’re ruining this for me look that all women understand.

Tristan’s mouth bunches in amusement. “I hope you take credit. Even I don’t carry that much cash.”

“We’d be happy to.” Tanya bounces over to the register and gleefully rings him up.

“Give yourself a good tip,” he instructs her, winking over his shoulder at me. I have to roll my eyes. Does he always get what he wants?

“You’re being too generous,” I say tightly. I hope he doesn’t think he can buy me. It’s flattering that he’s so determined, but it’s not happening. If he knew the chemistry Zed and I have, he’d understand. Even if Zed weren’t in the picture... Tristan is a client. He can be a friend, but he can’t be more than that.

Tristan shifts so he’s facing me directly. “You’ve given me more than money can buy, Doctor Stanley. Impy is the love of my life, and every extra day I have with her means the world to me. Let me spoil you a little to say thank you.”

I can’t help softening at the mention of his sweet old cat. Tristan might go about things in the wrong way sometimes, but his heart is in the right place. “I guess I should say thank you, then. This is a treat.”

“My pleasure.” Tristan gives an old-fashioned bow, but somehow, he can pull it off. “I’ll wait for you in the car.”

It's oddly thoughtful of him to give me the space to fully relax without anyone's eyes on me. I take a deep breath and let it out, ready to give myself over fully to the experience. But then I see Tanya herding a few disgruntled-looking customers out the side door. One of them even shoots me a glare over her shoulder.

My heart sinks. Tristan's impulsive gesture was incredibly kind to me, but it ruined several other people's days. I don't want my happiness to come at anyone else's expense.

"No!" Tanya says, scurrying over. "Don't you feel bad. I gave them all gift certificates for free treatments. They're very happy to come back tomorrow. And I'm splitting the tip with all the gals here, so they're happy, too."

"Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent. Girl, just sit back and enjoy yourself, please. That nice man is footing the bill, and we are going to pamper every inch of you. I wouldn't be surprised if you get a proposal tonight."

My cheeks heat up as Tanya steers me to one of the treatment rooms. Maybe I shouldn't have accepted Tristan's gift after all. "We're just friends, I swear. He's a vet client of mine, actually. Not a boyfriend."

"Mhm. Well, if you don't have the good sense to marry him, I will."

I can't help giggling. "He's all yours. I have..."

I almost said a boyfriend. But Zed's not my boyfriend. We had one date. One perfect night. No commitment. No plans for a future together. In fact, there's a ticking clock on our connection.

“Ohhhh,” Tanya says, nodding wisely. “I see.”

I’m glad she does, because I don’t. What do I have? A heart that’s already breaking. I’m pre-breaking it. Always been an overachiever like that.

Or maybe it’s just still broken from the first time, and I never put it back together. Gosh, it’s a little achey right now. Why am I moping when I just got a ten-thousand-dollar gift from a handsome guy who’s sitting outside in a limo?

Because he’s not the handsome guy I want. And the one I want isn’t even real . He’s a fantasy I’ve built up. He’s going to disappear again. If not tomorrow, then a week from now. A month. I could give him another fifteen years and a fated mate could snatch him away in a second.

How stupid am I? Tanya’s right. I should have the good sense to put my energy toward someone who isn’t going to disappear.

I step into the hewn-stone bath filled with steaming water and floating rose petals. As Tanya and her girls work the knots out of my muscles, pluck the stray hairs, and scrub away the vet-sweat, it’s like they dressing me in armor. And after the soak, when they’re painting every fingernail and eyelid pretty and fingerwaving my hair, they’re sharpening my sword.

Tanya zips me into my dress, a strapless navy sheath that sets off my eyes and bares my very exfoliated shoulders. The mirror doesn’t lie—I look good. I look like the kind of women who gets invited to speak at huge galas because I am that kind of woman.

I’m ready to go to battle for myself.

Last night was an indulgence. God, it was amazing. But it was just part of a dream,

and now I have to wake up. Maybe this event will be good for me because I can compare Zed and Tristan head-to-head. Use logic to prove that Zed's hold on my imagination doesn't make him superior to anyone else. I can't let him take my heart hostage forever.

He's just another guy. What's special about him, anyway? He's a dragon, but there are lots of dragon dudes. What makes him better than them just because I knew him once upon a time?

He's hot and sweet and smart and funny and he has two amazing dicks , a little voice reminds me. Tristan's pretty face and millions of dollars can't compete with that.

How stupid am I to stack a nice dick or two up against a literal fortune? I'm so stupid because I'm stupidly in love. That's been my problem all along, I think. I'm still in love with Zed after all these years. Maybe I always will be. But I'm not crazy...I think he feels the same way. I can't help grinning at the realization.

Tanya gives a low whistle. "I thought you were looking gorgeous, but with that smile on your face? Straight-up stunning."

Self-consciously, I arrange my skirt. "Aw, thanks. All credit to you and your team."

"You know, I feel a little bad for him," she says, sounding wistful.

"Who?"

She tips her pink ponytail toward the street outside where Tristan's limo is idling at the curb. "The one you're not in love with."

"That obvious, huh?"

“It’s all over your face, babe.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Zed

When Cari steps out of the limousine, she takes my breath away. She's always beautiful, but all dressed up, she assassinates my heart. Her dress reminds me of the one she wore for our ill-fated date way back when, but it's the sophisticated, grown-up version, and her blonde bob is styled into 1920s waves. She's a bombshell .

I'm not the only one who notices, either. Everyone around me is looking at her, too. But even in a crowd, her eyes immediately lock onto mine, her face brightening when she sees Radar by my side. She missed us as much as we missed her.

It'd be perfect if it weren't for the goddamn incubus holding her hand. At my feet, Radar's nostrils flare, his feathery little tail wagging as he catches Cari's scent. His feet start tippy-tapping in excitement until they draw near.

The moment Tristan's hellfire hits us, the hair on Radar's spine lifts, and a warning growl slips out.

"I know, buddy. I feel the same way," I tell him, leaning to scoop him up under my arm. While I'd like to bite Tristan's ankles as much as he would, I don't want Cari to have a moment of unpleasantness tonight.

"You found it!" Cari gushes, straightening Radar's bowtie before scratching between his ears. "Thanks so much for dog-sitting. I can't tell you how much I needed a day off. I feel relaxed for the first time in forever."

I lean close to kiss her on the cheek in greeting and murmur, "I remember you being

pretty relaxed last night.”

When I pull back, her cheeks are pink, and try as she might, she can’t keep the smile off her face. “Shhh,” she fusses, glancing at Tristan, who definitely overheard because I wanted him to.

His mouth is tight as he extends his hand to shake mine. “Luckily they washed all the dragon stench off her at the spa,” he says flatly, squeezing way too hard. I have no problem squeezing just as hard in return.

As if on cue, Radar growls menacingly from underneath my arm, and Tristan hurriedly steps back. He plucks a single stray dog hair from his lapel, frowning as he brushes more invisible ones off the front of his tuxedo shirt.

He thinks he could compete for Cari’s heart when he’s concerned about a little dog hair? Fucking idiot. “This is the Alliance for Animal Welfare gala. If you’re allergic to pet fur, you should have picked a different event.”

His return gaze is cool. “ You should have picked a different tux.”

Fuck. The fur lapels. I knew I shouldn’t have let Gabe talk me into this one.

“It’s vintage,” I say defensively.

None of the rental shops in San Drogo had tuxes available in my size, so Gabe, Radar, and I ended up at a cool vintage shop by the waterfront where the proprietor, a trolless with a dozen sparkling rings in her large, pointed ears, didn’t mind Radar coming inside the shop. She had eagerly shown us her collection of classic tuxedos with tail-holes.

Gabe, who’s always been more fashion-forward than me, pulled a navy wool jacket

with black curly-lamb lapels from the rack immediately.

I was skeptical at first, but it fit perfectly. The matching black pants even had some extra room in the crotch in case of a rogue half-shift.

“It looks like it was made for you,” the trolless crooned as she tied a black bowtie that matched Radar’s at the collar. She stepped back, looking me up and down. “Absolute perfection. I should hire you to model for my shop.”

Gabe nodded. “Seriously, dude, it’s sharp. You look straight off of this year’s Tokyo runways.”

I checked myself out in the mirror, trying to imagine what Cari would think of it. Would she be proud to be on my arm tonight? “I like it, but I don’t know about the fur,” I mused aloud.

“It’s respecting the animal to wear vintage fur,” the trolless assured me. “Plus, curly-lamb is a byproduct of the meat industry. It’s not like mink where it’s just raised for fashion.”

“Cari will love it,” Gabe added. “She can’t keep her hands off her dog, right? She’ll be petting you all night.”

So I went with it. But judging by the sideways looks I’m getting, not just from Tristan but others milling around the venue entrance, too, it was a bad choice.

“I’ll take it off when we get inside,” I tell Cari, offering her my free arm. She takes it, but Tristan doesn’t relinquish his hold on her other arm, so she’s sandwiched between us.

“I feel like a princess with her bodyguards,” she jokes, obviously trying to lighten the

mood.

It doesn't get any better inside, when we get to our assigned table and Tristan and I have a short tussle over who gets to pull out Cari's chair.

Tristan wins since I'm still carrying Radar. My feral form and I both growl at his smug expression.

"Hey," Cari whispers when I take the seat on her left and put my jacket under the table for Radar to use as a makeshift dog bed. "Stop. He's just being nice. Don't forget he gave us the extra ticket so you could come, okay?"

Right. I need to stay cool. She's my mate. Not even shitty demon-magic can change that. And I don't want to ruin her event by acting like a dick just because he's acting like a dick.

Tristan, of course, sits on her right. He appears riveted by the speakers during dinner, even standing to applaud some of them, and I can tell Cari approves, glowing every time he shows his support.

I don't know why it rankles me so much, but the performance he's putting on makes my scales itch. He's so fake. Everything about him is fake, from his perfect hair to his spotless shoes. I wonder if his beloved pet is even real.

Even Radar knows he's bad news. But my biggest ally is asleep on my jacket under the table, in a food coma after eating a dog dinner to rival the one served to the sapient guests.

"...the incredible Dr. Caroline Stanley," a dapper man at the podium exclaims, jarring me out of my thoughts. I was so caught up in hating Tristan that I completely missed what he said.

Tristan's already on his feet, helping Cari to the stage. Damn, that should be me.

"What did she win?" I ask the woman next to me, who's clapping loudly.

"The AAW Presidential Service Award," she says, eyes shining as she watches Cari. "I knew she'd get it. She's amazing. I'm so excited to be at her table."

"Me too," I say, meaning it.

"When the Alliance invited me to speak tonight, they didn't tell me they were giving me an award first," Cari says warmly into the mic, clutching the crystal statue to her chest as she blinks back tears. "I hardly feel right accepting it when so many people made it possible."

As she rattles off a list of names, Tristan retakes his seat, casually draping his arm over the back of Cari's chair. I scoot the chair with my foot so his arm falls off and replace it with my own.

He rolls his eyes. "Not surprising you're pissing on your territory like the beast you are."

My inner beast flexes, offering to show him what our feral form looks like, but I push him down, eyes on my mate. She's glowing up there. Shining for everyone to see. I am not going to fuck this up by shifting, no matter how much Tristan goads me.

"You're just jealous I have the one thing money can't buy."

"Can't it?" he purrs, turning his incubus glamour on me. Can't lie, he's good at what he does. Even I have trouble resisting his magnetism when he leans in conspiratorially. "I didn't have any trouble getting her out of her clothes at the spa earlier. Only cost ten thousand dollars. Here's the trick with Cari, though. You can't

buy her. You have to buy everyone else. The question for you is, can you afford them?" He winks, and the silly, glamourised part of me melts even as my feral form explodes with rage inside me.

Mate. We don't have to buy her. She's ours already.

My hand flexes with the need to claw the smug look off Tristan's face, and the back rail of the chair cracks. He snickers. He knows he's making me lose control. That's what he's trying to do with his nasty little demon tricks. But if he wants to play these dangerous games? There's nothing a dragon is better at than playing with fire.

By the time Cari is done with her uplifting speech, the room is buzzing with energy. Donation envelopes are passed out, and I see a lot of zeros on the checks that are eagerly written in the wake of her moving words. And when she walks off that stage? I'm right there, hand out, to help her down the steps and back to our seats.

"You were incredible," I tell her as I quickly swap her broken chair for my intact one and make space on the table for the heavy award statue. "I bet you doubled their donations with that speech."

"Tripled," Tristan says, handing her his check. Over her shoulder, I see that it's made out for a half-million dollars.

"Oh my god," she gasps, the slip of paper trembling in her fingers. "This is incredible, Tristan. They're going to be able to do so much with this."

His expression of triumph makes my stomach turn. He's right. I'll never get rid of him. All he has to do to own Cari's loyalty and affection is to buy everyone else. Her employees, her friends, the charitable organizations she supports... If they are happy, she'll be putty in his hands.

“How much did you donate, Dragon?” Tristan asks. Cari frowns, but I can’t tell if it’s at his rude question or the fact that my empty envelope is still on the table in front of me. The answer is obvious: I haven’t donated anything yet.

“His name is Zed,” Cari says firmly, answering that question.

“I’m waiting for the silent auction.” I quickly pocket the envelope like I might put a check in it later. I will put a check in it later. It’s just not going to amount to anything close to what Tristan can cough up. Demons have a way with money. Probably eighty percent of billionaires have some demon ancestry.

Dragons aren’t bad with money either, though. And that’s because we know how to protect what’s valuable.

“You don’t have to donate,” Cari says, sounding worried. She reaches out to stroke my forearm. “I didn’t invite you to squeeze money out of you. I just wanted to spend time with you while you’re in town.”

“How long are you in town, big guy?” Tristan asks, raising one brow. It’s a warning that if I don’t play by his rules, he’s going to tell her about all the little white lies I’ve told this week. About the tech conference, the “chance” meeting.

“Zed,” Cari reminds him, but there’s something quiet about her. She wants know the answer to his question, too.

“My work is flexible. I can do a lot of it remotely, so there’s not a set date I have to leave.”

“Zed’s in tech like you!” Cari says, sounding delighted to introduce the subject we have in common.

“I know.” Tristan tips back in his chair like the indolent demon he really is. “I looked him up after we ran into him in the park. Wanted to make sure he wasn’t some kind of predator. Cute little startup you got there. Had any buyer interest? My firm sometimes acquires that type of thing. It might actually go somewhere if it has the support of a bigger company behind it.”

I grind my teeth, dragonfire tickling the back of my throat. “We’re not looking to sell.”

“I mean, obviously. But you could whip it into shape. I’d be happy to give you some pointers.”

Cari beams at him. “That’s so nice of you. Isn’t that nice of him, Zed?”

Tristan raises his brows at me expectantly. I grimace, torn between making her happy and telling the truth. I just don’t have it in me to kiss his ass, though. “A little presumptuous, actually. Our company’s doing great. And since you did your research, you know that our apps are outperforming our competitors by a hundred-and-fifty percent. That’s because users love them. We’re not spending any more on marketing or packaging.”

Tristan cocks his head to the side. “Aren’t you the marketing guy, though?”

“We both do a little bit of everything, but yeah, I do most of the marketing.”

“So you’re saying most of the value in the company is on the tech side. Maybe my advice to your company is that your business partner doesn’t need the dead weight.”

His words are like a punch in the stomach. I know I’m lucky to partner with Gabe. He has expertise I don’t. But he wouldn’t be able to run the business without me, either. “Maybe you should stop talking before I make you regret saying that. I’m happy to

take this outside.”

“Stop it,” Cari pleads in a whisper. “Don’t be like this tonight.” When I look at her face, tears are welling in her eyes. Past her, I see victory in Tristan’s fleeting expression before he rearranges it into one of concern.

Shit, fuck, damn. I took his bait.

He likes that she’s upset. He’s not just trying to get me out of the picture, he’s trying to teach her a lesson. Just like he buys Cari through everyone else, he punishes her through everyone else, too. He’s angry she invited me to the event, so he’s hurting her by goading me into bad behavior.

I’m not going to let him use me like that anymore.

“I’m sorry, Cari. I shouldn’t have said that. Can I get you something to drink? Do you want to dance?” I hold out a hand, hoping she’ll remember how we held hands all night last night.

To my relief, she takes it.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Cari

Zed leads me out onto the dance floor. I wish this moment was more romantic and that I didn't have a lead weight in the pit of my stomach after enduring their back-and-forth bickering.

I was right: this night did give me a chance to compare Zed and Tristan, and I found them both lacking. They've been so caught up in their little pissing contest over me that it's like they forgot I was even there. Tristan came off like an arrogant jerk, and Zed's insecurities were on full display. Both of them acted jealous and petty.

The gala band starts to play a ballad, and Zed puts his hand on my waist. "I can't promise I'm a great dancer. I'm a little rusty when it comes to human dances."

"What about dragon dances? You could teach me one," I suggest, happy for the change in topic. Maybe this evening can be salvaged.

"Our dances are...um...aerial." He sounds apologetic as we start to dance a regular old human slow dance. He's right, he's not a very good dancer. Not the worst, either, just a little awkward. His broad shoulders and strong arms feel good as he leads me around the floor, though. Safe.

"What's it like to fly?" The question comes out more wistful than I intended. I guess I have my own insecurities. I'll never be able to fly like a female dragon. They dance in the air. They can probably have sex in the air. That's something he'll share with his future mate that I can't.

“It’s an incredible feeling. Like the whole world is at your fingertips. There are so many things you can see from up there that you just never experience on the ground. Places you can go that roads don’t.” He shakes his head, chuckling to himself. “No, I’m not saying that.”

“What?”

“Sorry, talking to myself. My feral form has a lot of ideas about where he wants to take you when he finally gets his claws on you. Trust me, none of his thoughts are appropriate for a gala setting.”

My core clenches at the images that run through my head, the ones I’ve replayed since I first saw Zed in his feral form, standing in the ruins of our house. I don’t think I’ve had a single orgasm in the last fifteen years without that picture in my mind, and my body is conditioned to respond. “Tell him I’m into it.”

Zed dips his head to murmur in my ear, “Oh, he knows. He can smell you. He really wants to taste you. If you thought my tongue felt good, you’re going to love his.”

Getting licked by his feral form? My thighs quiver and my knees weaken, but Zed holds me up, chuckling softly until I regain the ability to support my own weight.

“Sorry,” I say. “You surprised me with that one.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, sounding more serious. “About everything earlier. I shouldn’t have sunk to Tristan’s level. I know he doesn’t mean anything to you.”

“He’s my friend,” I correct, a little annoyed that he’s bringing Tristan back into the conversation right now. The angry, unfulfilled buzz in my clit agrees. “But you can’t feel threatened by every male friend I have. That’s not healthy.”

“Not all of them,” he agrees. I start to relax, but then he adds, “Only the ones trying to manipulate you into fucking them by throwing their money around.”

“What?” I stop dancing in the center of the floor. Other couples in tuxedos and satin have to divert around us.

“The donation. The spa thing. He’s trying to buy you,” Zed explains earnestly. “He knows you don’t care about money, so he’s using his money to play on your emotions.”

“He cares about the cause!” My raised voice catches the attention of people around us on the floor, so I lower it slightly.

“He wants you,” Zed says stubbornly. “He doesn’t give a shit about the cause. If you liked preserving the waterfront, he’d donate to Save the Beach. If you were teaching literacy to little kids, he’d throw his money at the San Drogo Public Library or wherever.”

Part of me, deep down, knows there’s a core of truth to what he’s saying. But I don’t like this petty, jealous side of Zed. And I don’t like thinking that I’ve been manipulated, either. I knew what Tristan was doing at the spa. I’m not stupid, and it’s offensive that Zed thinks I’m that gullible.

I pull him off the dance floor into the hallway the food service staff uses to ferry fresh champagne to the guests and dirty plates to the kitchen. “So what if that’s true? I’m not saying it is, but for the sake of argument. He’s still doing good things with his money. If the end result is positive, does it matter what his motivations are?”

“Yes!” Zed nearly roars, grasping his horns with both hands in frustration. “Good things done for bad reasons don’t count. It’s all a lie. It’s fake. The second he gets what he wants, that shell of goodness will crumble and disappear. You’ll see.”

I feel myself detaching emotionally. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s all a lie. But in the meantime, he’s saving hundreds if not thousands of animals. Would you rather he kept his money in the bank and his intentions clear?”

“I’d rather he kept his hands off you,” Zed growls, his golden eyes glowing as he steps toward me. “I don’t care what the fuck he does with his money.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, his hands aren’t on me,” I snap, backing up until I’m pressed against the wall and he’s only inches away. I put my palms against his taut stomach and push him with all my strength until he steps back and gives me more space, chest heaving as he eyes me warily. “I’m the one who gets to decide that, not you.”

“Is there a problem here?” Tristan asks, striding up to us. “Is he bothering you, Caroline?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know.” I cross my arms and lean back against the wall, feeling miserable.

Tristan kneels in front of me so we’re closer to eye level. Both of us ignore the snarl that rips out of Zed at the gesture. Tristan clasps my hands in his. “What can I do to make this better? I can have security ask him to leave. Or we can just ignore him. He’s nothing, really. He wasn’t even supposed to be here. Let’s forget him and have the night we planned.”

He turns his gorgeous gaze on me, and I feel my heart twinge, ready to go along with his plan.

“Don’t fall for it, Cari. He’s not playing fair,” Zed warns quietly.

I pull my hands out of Tristan's, a million emotions running through me. Tristan is

trying to manipulate me. He wants me to himself, so he's reminding me that he had dibs. But I invited Zed to come with us. I wanted him here because I love his stupid, jealous, stubborn ass.

Zed didn't crash Tristan's date with me because we didn't have date. I was always clear with Tristan that we would never be more than friends. When he asked me to come, I already had my own ticket.

Now that I think about it, I'm the goddamn guest of honor because of my years of dedication and hard work. And they both think this event is about them ?

I'm so, so disappointed in both of them.

"Answer one question for me, Tristan. You have to promise to be honest."

"I swear."

"Do you really care about the AAW? Would you have donated the same amount if I weren't here?"

Tristan smiles reassuringly. "Of course."

"He's lying," Zed blurts out.

"You don't know that," I remind him.

His scales darken, and his tail lashes behind him. "Yes, I do! He's a goddamn incubus! He wants you, and lying to get what they want is what demons do."

"What?!" I rip my hands out of Tristan's and stare down at him, horrified. "Is that true? You're a demon?"

Tristan rises, brushing off the knees of his perfectly tailored suit. Perfect suit, perfect hair, perfect smile on a perfect face. Of course , he's a demon. Why didn't I see it?

"I never said otherwise," he says blandly. "I don't see how it's relevant, anyway. Certainly less relevant than your lies, Dragon. Care to explain to Cari that TechMeet doesn't start until next week? That it was no happenstance that you ran into us in the park that night?"

"Is that true?!" I demand, turning on Zed.

"That's a separate issue. Your kind has a long reputation for being untrustworthy," Zed bites out, avoiding eye contact with me as he dodges my question. "Cari has a right to know who she's talking to before she makes any decisions."

"A client," Tristan replies in those same cool tones. "A likeminded animal-lover. A friend, I hope." He turns to me. "I apologize for not being more forthcoming about my species. You can understand why I might not volunteer the information upon first meeting. People tend to stereotype."

I nod, my heart rate settling down. I can understand the need for privacy. Why you might not tell someone everything about yourself right away. Zed isn't settling down, though. He paces the short hallway, getting more and more agitated. I need to defuse this situation somehow.

"It's fine. No harm done. But I wish you'd told me, Tristan. I wouldn't have held it against you. I have to know, though...have you been using your glamour on me?"

He flashes me an apologetic smile. "For my appearance, of course. And only a few times otherwise. You're fairly resistant to it. That's part of why I like you so much."

Aw. My chilled heart melts a little at the thought that I might be different than other

girls. “Wait a minute. Are you using it right now?”

His smile turns into a grimace. “Maybe? It’s not always one-hundred-percent conscious. It kind of just...comes out of me when I want something.”

“Fuck this guy,” Zed growls, pointing a clawed finger at Tristan. “He’s still being a weasel. Apologize for glamouring her and then show her your true form.”

Tristan shakes his head. “No way. Not here. I don’t want to ruin the gala.”

Zed’s still storming. “Fuck the gala.”

“Zed!” I yelp. “Don’t say that. This event is important to me.”

He throws up his hands. “That’s the point! He’s using it to manipulate you! Any threat to him, like admitting his wrongdoing or showing his true self? He turns it into a threat to the gala, because he knows you’ll protect it. He’s always going to do that...anything you care about, he’ll use to control you.”

Anything I care about. My dog is the first thing that flashes in my mind. I feel the blood drain from my face. “Where’s Radar?” I ask Tristan. “I left him with you at the table when Zed and I went to dance. Where is he?”

Tristan shrugs. “He was asleep.”

“You just abandoned him?” I’m already headed across the ballroom as fast as I can in my heels, dodging dancers, squinting to see if I can spot his triangle ears and fluffy tail. So many people brought their pets, it’s hard to pick him out.

At home, where he’s familiar with everything and I’ve scent-labeled the furniture, he can navigate just fine. But here? In a huge venue crowded with hundreds of people

and pets? If he wandered off on his own, he could be anywhere! He could have walked out the front door into the street!

I hear Tristan and Zed bickering behind me as they follow me back to our table, but I don't even care anymore. All I care about is whether Radar is safe. I crouch down, grimacing when I hear a few stitches in my skirt pop.

There, curled up on Zed's tux jacket, is my little polka-dot pup. I hold my hand out for him to sniff so he knows it's me before I scratch his head. "There you are, my good boy."

He blinks drowsily at me, thumps his tail a couple of times, and goes back to sleep.

I stand up and turn to face Zed and Tristan, furious. Both are wearing hangdog looks, like they wish I'd call them good boys, too. But they're not. They're both lying jerks who are trying to get what they want without any regard for my feelings.

"I can't make you leave the event, but I want both of you to stay away from me and Radar," I tell them. "I don't want to see or hear from either of you again until I have time to think about everything. I want to enjoy this event, support the AAW, and dance my ass off. That's all. Please respect that."

Zed nods, stepping back. "I'll go. I'm sorry—"

I hold up my hand to stop him. "Don't. I'll contact you when I'm ready to talk."

He swallows hard, nods, and disappears into the crowd in the direction of the front entrance.

"I want to support the Alliance, too," Tristan says, meeting my eyes. "It's just as important to me as it is to you."

I can feel my center go gooey as he tries to glamour me, but I know his tricks now and ignore the sensation. It feels gross, not good. “Fine. You can support them from another table.”

“I’m a ticketholder. A major donor. I have every right to be here.” Is Tristan whining? The guy who has been using what he knows about me to manipulate me into a relationship I don’t want is acting like a victim because I don’t want to sit next to him anymore?

“You do. But I have every right to ignore you.”

Something hard and ugly crosses his face. I would have missed it if I wasn’t so familiar with his face from his many clinic visits.

“I haven’t turned in my check yet,” he says, patting his breast pocket where the corner of the envelope peeks out. I suck in a breath. Would he really deprive the AAW of his donation if I don’t do what he wants?

“I haven’t written Impy’s new prescription yet,” I say just as coldly. I’d never deny that sweet old girl her medicine, but he’s not the only one who can use the things people love to manipulate them.

To his credit, Tristan looks stricken. “You wouldn’t!”

“No, I wouldn’t. That’s the difference between us. You would.”

“I wouldn’t, either. I swear,” he says, gorgeous eyes brimming with picture-perfect tears, lips slightly swollen like he’s in a high-end lip gloss campaign. “I would have turned in my envelope either way. I just wanted a chance to apologize. To make things right for my bad behavior earlier. Sometimes my demon instincts take over and I go about things the wrong way, but it’s always with good intentions. Let me get you

some champagne to make it up to you.”

He lifts his hand to flag down a waiter, and my head starts to throb. Is he doing bad things for good reasons, or is he doing good things for bad reasons? I pinch the bridge of my nose, willing away my impending headache. Why are men so infuriating? Even if Zed is being shady about why he’s in town and where our relationship stands, at least he respected my boundaries and left when I asked.

“Tristan. If you don’t leave in the next thirty seconds, I will.”

Finally, he listens. With a practiced, mournful look, he leaves out the front, his donation envelope still in his pocket.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Zed

“Did Cari like the jacket?” Gabe asks when I walk in the door of my hotel room, glancing up from his laptop. Then he catches sight of my expression and spins around in the desk chair to face me fully. “Uh... I guess I don’t need to ask how it went. Shit. What happened?”

I flop down on the other bed. “I don’t even know. It was a total disaster. Cari kicked me out of the event, and she was probably right to do it. That demon friend of hers knows how to get under my skin. I acted like an idiot. Almost got myself into a fight.”

“A fight with a demon? Are you crazy?”

I cover my face with my hand. “Yeah. Crazy for her.”

“Bro. I’ve been telling you, your obsession with this chick is not healthy. You’re making really bad decisions because of her. You could get yourself killed going up against the wrong demon dude.”

I know. Why couldn’t I just keep my mouth shut and show Cari a good time? Damn, I really screwed up. “She doesn’t even want to talk to me now.”

“Probably for the best,” Gabe says sympathetically. “She’s been causing issues for you for as long as I’ve known you. She put you in the hospital. She got you in trouble with the law. Now she’s getting you tangled up with some demon who’s even more obsessed with her than you are.”

Every impulse in me is to go to her house and wait for her. Make sure she and Radar get home okay. Talk to her. Tell her that we're mates, meant to be together forever. But she specifically said she doesn't want to see me or hear from me, so I know she'll be even more upset if I do it.

"What should I do? She told me to stay away from her."

"You stay the fuck away, that's what."

"I could hide in the bushes so she doesn't see me." The look Gabe gives me is so disgusted that I'm embarrassed I even had the thought. "Never mind."

He spins in his chair, frowning thoughtfully. "You need a distraction. A very sexy distraction who smells good and is eager to please."

I groan. "No strippers."

He scoffs. "Obviously. You don't need to pay for it. We already made the app. Get on MateDate where all the monsterfuckers are. That's why we created it, so monsters can hook up with thirsty humans with the least amount of effort."

Mate, my feral form growls, completely pissed at the suggestion of any female besides the one he wants. "That sounds like an even worse idea than your recommendation to wear a fur coat to an animal-rights charity event."

"It was vintage," he says defensively. "I'm telling you, it'll take two minutes to get one of those chicks in your lap. Trust me, they'll make you forget your own name. Cari is not the only bitch in the sea."

"Shut the fuck up about Cari," I snarl, flinging a pillow at him.

“I’m not talking about her, I’m talking about what you obviously need. Don’t shoot the messenger.”

“What I need is to update my spreadsheet.” I grab my laptop from the safe and sit on the bed while I update it with every scrap I can gather from my memory about the event: what she said, what she wore, what she ate. The parts of her speech that I remember. The people who said they admired her, the song we danced to.

It soothes something deep inside me to record all the details that I can, hoarding them like treasure as the sacred words of the alokoi bond echo in my head:

I see her. I feel her flame. She is known to me.

Cari is mine. No matter what it takes, no matter how many apologies I have to make, no matter how much time she needs, we are meant to be together. I can wait.

“Wish you spent that much time working,” Gabe snarks from the desk. I growl at him, and he laughs. “Hey, I was thinking. Since we’re already both down here anyway, maybe we should go to TechMeet next week. I talked to the datacenter that hosts our servers, and they have a couple passes for us if we want them.”

I lift my brows, surprised that Gabe wants to go to a busy conference. That’s usually my thing, not his. I don’t mind the excuse to stay in town, though. I’m not sure my feral form would let me leave San Drogo even if I wanted to. “Sure. Sounds good. You’ve got to get your own room if one opens up, though.”

He rolls his eyes. “But you’re so fun to room with. I love hanging out with people who cry into their spreadsheets all night.” I aim another pillow at him. He pitches it back, scrambling for the one on his folding cot, and the room briefly descends into an all-out pillow war until someone calls from the front desk to ask us to be quiet.

Snickering like twelve-year-olds, we order late-night hot wings for me and pizza for him and stay up until dawn brainstorming a new app. Then Gabe persuades me to skip sleeping and instead go on a morning solo hike in a nearby valley where shifting is allowed, so I get to stretch my wings a little, too.

This is what I needed. Friendship, a little fun, and yes... some distraction. A chance to clear my head. Really see what's important.

When I get back from my hike, Gabe has ordered a full spread for us, and we have a productive working lunch. It's a good day, despite the fact that Cari still hasn't contacted me.

She will eventually.

I hope.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Cari

I drank too much champagne after the guys left the gala. I'm not used to drinking very much, and I wake up in the morning with a pounding headache and fur stuck in my mouth from using Zed's abandoned tux jacket as a pillow because I missed his smell.

I don't regret kicking them out, though. The other women at my table, who'd overheard the tail-end of my conversation with Tristan, were so sympathetic and awesome. We danced and partied the night away, taking turns watching each other's pets. We all got along so well that we formed a monthly brunch club where we can all bring our dogs.

Plus, the Alliance for Animal Welfare raised a record amount of money, even without Tristan's fat check. Who knows if he even has that money. The check might have been a prop to play with my emotions. In any case, neither I nor the Alliance need him.

I'm being mean. Tristan obviously has money. He probably just forgot to take the envelope out of his pocket when he left because emotions were so high. I'm not feeling as charitable toward Zed, though. My voicemail inbox is conspicuously empty of apologies. He hasn't even texted me.

You made him promise not to , a little voice niggles at me. I don't know why that's stopping him, though. It's not like he's been honest with me so far. What's another lie?

I don't even know what he's lying about, but it must be bad if Tristan was holding it over his head. Something about Zed being in town early for the conference? He could have just told me that. But instead of being honest with me and building on what we have, Zed chose to attack someone else over his stupid jealousy.

If he'd talked to me, he'd know that I only want him. Whatever he's hiding from me, we could've worked through it. Maybe we still can, once we've both cooled off a bit.

Oh no. What if his secret is that he has found his fated mate?

My heart thumps a little too hard, and I start to feel sick. I roll out of bed and rush to the bathroom to take some anti-nausea meds and rinse the sour hangover taste out of my mouth.

Putting thoughts of Zed out of my mind, I make breakfast for me and Radar and get dressed in clean scrubs to volunteer at the shelter. I have a lot of practice carrying on with life while trying not to think about a certain red dragon, so I put him out of my mind.

Radar loves visiting the San Drogo Animal Shelter on our volunteer days. He gets to hang out in the yard with the smaller, elderly dogs. While he has a blast meeting, greeting, and playing with his little buddies, I work in the OR doing assembly-line surgeries.

The staff there is awesome, and today, we get a whole colony of feral cats done with really good outcomes. Feeling great about it, I'm washing up to go home when I hear raised voices in the hallway.

"I don't want a lap cat! I specifically told you I want a sick cat. The sicker, the better. I want one barely clinging to life!" an angry, male voice shouts. Is that... Tristan ? I shut off the water to hear their conversation better.

“Sir, we adopt out healthy pets here. Sick cats are treated by our veterinarian until they are ready for new homes,” the adoption coordinator says patiently.

The voice switches from pissed-off to a purr. “Isn’t that expensive?”

Shit. That’s definitely Tristan.

“We’re funded through a city grant and donations from the public. You can sponsor a sick animal, if you’re interested.” Wily, clever coordinator. That’s why she has the job.

Tristan is undeterred, though. “I’d be happy to foster one in my home and pay for all necessary treatments. I have extensive experience with caregiving for cats with special needs.”

He’s not lying. He’s done wonders for Impy. Her condition is very stable now, even though it’s taken a lot of effort on his part to get her to that point. But there’s something so uncomfortable and pushy about what he’s doing.

Even the adoption coordinator senses it, because she’s not budging. “These animals need round-the-clock care, or at least daily vet visits. They’re not suitable as pets. I can show you—”

“No!” he barks. Then his voice sweetens, and I can tell he’s using his glamour on her because the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. “Frequent veterinary care is part of the plan. I have a close relationship with Dr. Caroline Stanley, in fact. I’d be happy to set up standing daily appointments with her in advance if that would give the shelter the confidence to let me adopt your sickest cat.”

Oh, god. I feel faint. I lean against the wall, forcing myself to breathe. He’s doing this so that I have to spend time with him. Impy isn’t sick enough anymore, so he needs a

new cat whose health is worse.

“Let me talk to the director and see what I can do,” the coordinator murmurs breathily. His demon magic has finally worked on her.

Maybe it has also worked on me, because I’m having a hard time seeing what’s wrong with Tristan’s methods. He’s only doing good things. He’s helping the shelter out financially by taking on the burden of care. He’s going to give the sick cat the best chance at health because of all of the equipment and expertise he’s acquired by owning Impy. And he’s supporting my clinic with his dedication to providing the best vet care possible to his pets. He’s every vet’s dream as a client, just like he’d be every woman’s dream as a partner.

But there’s something wrong about it, too. I just wish I had the words to explain why. I know if I confront him, he’ll talk his way out of it like he always does, so instead I go the back way to the director’s office. Through the glass door, I can see the adoption coordinator in there, pleading Tristan’s case.

I can’t help it. I poke my head in. “I’m leaving for the day. Go ahead and call me if there are any problems with the colony overnight, but they all look pretty good.”

“Thanks so much, Cari.” The director lifts his hand to wave goodbye, then hesitates, glancing at the coordinator. “Actually, your name just came up. There’s a man here who wants to adopt, and he says you’re his regular vet?”

I nod and take a deep breath. I have to do the right thing here. “Tristan Vance. I heard him in the hall. He’s... interested in me. I believe he’s trying to have more contact with me by adopting an unhealthy cat. He’s a good pet owner. Very dedicated and can afford the veterinary care. But I’m afraid I won’t be able to treat his animals anymore. Let him know that, and if he still wants to adopt, I don’t see any reason why he shouldn’t.”

The director blinks at me. “I’ve never dealt with a situation like this.”

“I know. It’s weird.” I shrug, suddenly exhausted and terribly, horribly lonely. I hate this. I hate that I’m now second-guessing every conversation I’ve ever had. Has anyone in my life been honest with me? I just want someone to hold me and tell me that everything is going to be okay.

Truthfully, there’s only one pair of arms that will do. The ones that tried to warn me about Tristan. That tried to protect me from his manipulation.

“Appreciate your help,” the director says, and the coordinator, who seems to be coming to her senses as Tristan’s glamour wears off, echoes his thanks.

“See you next time, ” I say, and head over to the play yard to pick up Radar. He’s pretty worn out, too, so I carry him home, cuddling him close, breathing in the familiar smell of his head as I walk.

What would I do without this little guy? I don’t have to guess what he feels. He never pretends or lies. I don’t think I’ll ever get another dog when he’s gone. It’s like my heart has grown into a particular shape and only certain things can fit in it.

My work.

Radar.

Zed.

When I get back to my cottage, there’s a bouquet of sunflowers on the steps. I pick them up, smiling, knowing exactly who they’re from. Zed’s so thoughtful. I’m not surprised he remembers my favorite flower. I almost skip inside to arrange them, then quickly text him.

Cari

We need to talk.

He shoots back a reply immediately.

Zed

I'm so glad you messaged. I owe you a huge apology,

Cari

No, I owe you one. You were right about Tristan. I should have listened to you. Can you come over?

Zed

Be right there.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Zed

“I gotta go,” I tell Gabe, slamming my laptop shut.

He snorts. “No need to announce your piss like it’s a flight taking off.”

I stuff my feet into my shoes and grab my jacket. “Not that. Gonna go see Cari.”

His jaw drops. “What the fuck? I thought we agreed you were going to stay away from her. Do you have a restraining-order kink or something?”

“She needs me.”

“For what?” When I shrug, he rolls his eyes. “You need a therapist.”

“If Cari wants me there, that’s all I need to know.”

“When will you be back?” When I shrug again, he makes an annoyed noise. “What about the conference? What about our networking plan?”

I pause, hand on the door knob. “I don’t know. I’ll figure it out.”

“For the record, you’re a dumb shit. If you get put in jail over this chick, I’m going to find a new business partner.”

I laugh my head off all the way across the park. He’s so negative sometimes. I don’t take it personally, though. He’s a pessimist, I’m an optimist. That’s why we work

well together, because we balance each other out.

Anyway, my heart is soaring too high to worry about details like conference networking plans. I can't believe Cari is ready to talk to me already. I was prepared to wait fifteen more years if I had to.

She meets me at the door, the first thing she does throw her arms around my waist. "I'm sorry," she sobs into my chest before I even get inside.

"No, sunflower, no. I'm the sorry one." I scoop her up in my arms, shut the door with my foot, and carry her into the living room where Radar is sleeping on his bed in the corner. I find us a seat on the comfortable leather sofa and hold her in my lap, rocking her until her tears dry.

"You were right about Tristan," she finally says. "He's...not good. Not bad, either, but not good like I thought he was. He was crafting the world around me so I'd do what he wanted. I'm so sorry I didn't believe you."

"You have nothing to be sorry about," I assure her, stroking her hair, letting the soft strands play through my fingers. "If I'd been more open with you, this never would've been an issue. I'm sorry I didn't tell you the truth about why I'm here in San Drogo. I didn't come for the conference. I came to see you. The night I ran into you and Tristan in the park? I was waiting for you there. It wasn't an accidental meeting."

She sits up, swallowing hard. "Why?"

"I saw your final post on @SeeRadarRun and I thought... I thought something happened to Radar. I thought he passed away."

"Oh," she says, and I can tell she's mentally reviewing her post. "It was sort of a

mysterious goodbye, wasn't it? I can see why you'd think that."

I nod. "I knew you'd be devastated, so I got my friend to find your address and wrote you a letter. But I couldn't bring myself to mail it. I kind of went nuts and decided to deliver it myself. Flew all night to get here." Sheepishly, I take the letter out of my pocket and attempt to straighten the bent corners before handing it to her.

"Should I read this?"

"If you want. It doesn't really apply since our little guy is still alive. But listen, Cari. There's something else I have to tell you. I don't know why it's taken so long except that I didn't want you to think badly of your mate."

"My mate?" She blinks rapidly, clearly confused. I am fucking this up, once again.

I start over. "I didn't want you to think badly of me. You're my—I'm your—"

Mate, my feral form exults, and his satisfaction blooms, filling my bones with strength and my heart with courage.

"We're fated mates," I finish. "You and I are meant to be. That's why we were so drawn to each other back in high school, and why we never forgot each other in all this time. Why it's never worked out with anyone else. Why there's always been something missing. You're my alokoi."

She's crying again. "What? Why didn't you tell me back then?"

"Because I didn't know! Because I was an idiot! Human mates were so rare back then that it didn't seem possible. I thought it was a crush. Everyone told me it was a crush. But then it didn't go away, even after everything that happened. I started to suspect you were something more, but I didn't know for sure until I flew here and scented

you in the park.”

Her tears are dry now, her cheeks as red as mine. She smacks my sternum gently with the flat of her hand. “Why didn’t you tell me then ?”

Shame is like a lead weight, pressing on my chest. “Because I didn’t want to scare you off if you didn’t feel the same way. Things felt so natural between us, I was afraid that if I told the truth, you’d run away forever. It’s not exactly a good look to say hey, I’ve been cyberstalking you for a decade and finally got my hacker friend to look up your address so I could stalk you in person.”

“You couldn’t help it!” she protests. “Dragons get obsessed with their mates. It’s just how it is. I wouldn’t blame you for that.”

My throat aches. I thought it would feel good to finally unburden myself, but it just highlights what a dumbass I am. I’ve made so many mistakes with Cari. My biggest one is that I gave up too easily. I sent her one message in all the time we were apart. One .

I should have sent a hundred. A thousand. One every day.

“I’m sorry,” I say weakly. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m not.” She rearranges herself so she’s straddling my lap and cups my jaw in her hands, pulling my head down so our foreheads can press together. “If I could download my brain into yours so you could feel how happy I am, I would. I’ve always wanted a dragon mate. I’ve always wanted you . I love you, Zed. I’ll never be sorry that it worked out this way, even if we lost a few years. So don’t you dare say that to me again.”

“I love you, too. I never stopped loving you.” The kiss we share is long and full of

yearning, like we might find our missing time in it.

Mate. My feral form and I are together on that one. We're together on the half-shift that makes two cocks swell inside my jeans, too.

Cari sinks down, pressing her warm, human pussy against them. I can feel her core clench even through two layers of denim. She pulls back from our kiss and breathlessly exclaims, "I get both?!"

"I promised you both, didn't I? Because you took me so well the first time. You came so many times for me." Gods, I'm getting excited just thinking about how she looked when I was done with her. "This time you can have them any way you want."

She bounces excitedly, and I feel my zipper split in response. So much for this pair of jeans. It's worth it for the gleeful, hungry expression on her face. She reaches up, stroking one of my horns. I feel the heat of her hand all the way down my spine, and my cocks throb harder.

I want to give her everything she craves. And I know she's been craving this, the full dragon experience. So I lift my hips and strip off my pants. My cocks spill out between us, already heavy and thick and ready for her.

Her eyes go wide, then hungry as she looks them over. "You're so huge, Zed. I didn't get a good look last time because you didn't shift until you were already inside me. I thought my dildos were the right size, but..."

I chuckle, a deep, rumbling sound that vibrates through my chest. "You can take them. You already proved it."

I grab her hips and pull her closer, letting her feel how much I want her. She gasps and grinds, the rough denim of her shorts frictioning against my ridges. Then, with an

impatient noise, she reaches down to take off her shorts so there's nothing left between us.

I help her pull her tank top off, too, exposing her succulent tits. I bury my snout between them, scraping my scales over her soft skin, picking up as much of her scent as I can.

"Rub yourself on me," I tell her. While I worship her breasts by licking and sucking on every inch of them, she runs her hand down my belly to my top cock, using it like a toy to tease between her legs.

The first touch is searing even though I run a few degrees warmer than she does. She's so wet already, just from grinding in my lap.

"Your pussy's so hot," I mumble into her cleavage.

"What about the rest of me?" she teases, torturing my cock with swift slides through her folds. That's my little brat. Talking back because she trusts me. Because she loves me.

"I don't know yet. I'll let you know when we get there. I'm going to fuck every part of you."

She moans, rubbing my cock faster against her clit. My tail twitches and coils around her ankle, caressing her calf and the tender back of her knee. She gasps and writhes, surprised by the ticklish sensation, but doesn't pull away.

I lean down and whisper, "You're going to take all of me, Cari. Both of me, all the way. I'm going to knot you even if we need all night to get there."

Her breath hitches, and she nods eagerly.

“That’s my girl. That’s my alokoi.”

That’s my mate.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Cari

I can't believe this is happening. All this time, I've been worried that Zed was going to ghost me, and he's actually my mate . I have a dragon that's mine.

It's a fantasy I've never allowed myself, that I might ever have his heart. I've restricted my fantasies to dragon cocks , and I have two of those in my hands now: thick, pulsing, and leaking hot pre-cum over my hand. And the way his tail wraps around me and explores my body is almost like another lover, curious and demanding.

I circle the head of his cock around my clit. His skin is hot to the touch, the scales smooth and hard but so sensitive. He groans every time I bring his cock near my entrance, bucking his hips up.

"You want inside?" I tease, denying him again. He feels so good against my clit that I don't want to stop.

"Yesss," he hisses through his teeth, a wisp of smoke curling from his nostrils as his claws prick into my skin. He tries to work my hips down to take his cock, but I dodge it again, biting my lip as I chase down my orgasm.

"You gotta wait until I come." It doesn't take long. A few more grinds against his upper shaft, and my orgasm hits hard and fast, blowing through me like a windchime in a rainstorm.

When I pause to lick some of his salty, smoky pre-cum off my fingers, Zed growls,

and the sound sends a shiver down my spine.

“Inside, Cari. Now.”

“I just wanted a little taste first.” I look up at him, and his golden eyes burn into mine, his fangs peeking out from his parted lips. He’s so beautiful in his half-shifted form, so powerful and primal.

“Then taste them,” he says, his voice a deep purr that vibrates through the air, making goosebumps raise on my arms.

Am I dreaming? Is he really mine?

I nod, eager to please him, eager to feel him fill me up in every way. I slide off his lap onto the floor so I can take the upper one into my mouth, sucking it like a popsicle, tasting our mixed flavors. Zed’s eyes roll back in his head, and he slides his fingers into my hair. His claws scrape delicately over my scalp as I bob up and down, enjoying the sensation of his cockhead bumping against the back of my throat.

I stroke the lower one in time with my mouth, feeling its more pronounced ridges pulse and swell in my palm. It’s so thick and long, it’s going to fill me up completely. The ribbed section at the base that will swell into his knot might be more than I can take, despite my years of practice with the silicone alternative.

My pussy is ambitious though, begging for the chance to try. I show him with my mouth, switching to his lower cock and swallowing it as deep as I can, wrapping my fist around the base to squeeze his knot. His thighs shake, and I can feel his balls tighten against my knuckles.

“Not yet, fuck.” He groans and pulls me away by my hair, then lifts me into his lap so I’m straddling him again. “I need to be inside you when I come. You ready for me?”

I nod, already squirming into position so I'm facing away from him, my back to his front and his lower cock notched against my entrance. I'm so wet now, I'm dripping all over him, and his upper cock slips easily against my crack like it's a waterslide. Even so, I doubt my natural wetness is going to be enough to take him in my ass.

"Let me run to the bedroom for lube," I suggest. I have some really slippery stuff that is great for my biggest toys.

"No need." He holds my waist, pinning me to his lap as his chest heaves behind me. "Best lube is dragonseed. Helps you stretch and heal. I'm going to fill up this pussy with it and then we'll see about that ass."

Who knew my sweet, awkward, adorable dragon had such a filthy mouth?

"Can't wait any more," he says, guiding his lower cock into my pussy.

I was right...it's a lot girthier than the one I took last time. It takes extra effort to get each ridge past my opening. But as I sink down on him, inch by inch, the feeling of him stretching me open is everything. Even uninflated, his knot tests my limits, and my lower belly bulges slightly when he's fully seated.

I pull his hand around to press against it. "Feel that? That's you."

"Fuck," he groans, holding my hips tight to his groin so he's as deep as he can be. "You feel so godsdamned good, like your pussy was made to fit me."

"Oh, it wasn't made this way. I trained for this," I giggle, feeling tipsier than I did at the gala.

"No," he grunts, bouncing me in his lap so his cock lodges deep inside me to punctuate his words. "Made. For. Me. Mine. Mate. " His voice slips into the deep,

guttural tone that I know means his feral form is taking over.

I lean back and lift my arms to wrap around his neck. His arms band around my waist, crossing so he can cup my breasts. As he massages and squeezes them, he starts to thrust up into me, his movements powerful and sure.

Every ridge strokes my inner walls with unrelenting pressure. They strum my G-spot, and my pleasure quickly skyrockets. His feral growls and snarls just push me higher.

I'd thought my endless, easy orgasms our first time together might be a fluke, but apparently not, because it doesn't take long for him to coax another one out of me. This one is slow and dreamy and goes on and on, making my whole body quiver in anticipation of Zed's knot and how it'll feel when it expands.

But just as that band of flesh starts to swell inside me, he pulls out and strokes himself to a finish, his jets of hot cum splashing over his hands and my belly and thighs.

As gloriously satisfying as that orgasm was, I feel cheated. I wanted that knot. I reach up behind me to tug on his horn. "Hey. You said you'd knot me."

He hums affirmatively, the sound coming from deep in his chest. "We'd be stuck together for a few hours. I don't want to wait that long to have both cocks inside you."

Can't argue with that logic. He scrapes a palmful of his cum off my belly with his left hand and motions for me to shift forward with the other. I lean, bracing my hands on his knees, still a little shaky. I jump when he applies it, even though it's still warm from his body.

It's thicker and slicker than my own lubrication, but beyond a slight tingle, I don't

notice any other special properties. But when he starts pushing it inside me, I can feel the benefits he mentioned.

With the help of his cum, I easily stretch to accommodate two of his thick fingers. It doesn't numb the sensation at all, just takes away any of the discomfort that sometimes comes with initial penetration. It feels so naughty to sit like this, so spread out for his scrutiny while he's knuckles-keep inside me.

"Is that all you got?" I wiggle back against his fingers, trying to take more and show off a little. He pulls them out to give me a swift, playful slap on the ass.

"No one would guess a good girl like you had such a demanding little brat inside," he scolds, warmth in his tone as his hands knead my cheeks and spread me open.

"Sorry," I chirp, not sorry at all.

In one rough, deliberate movement, he sinks his lower cock into my pussy that's already stretched out and ready for him.

And then, oh god, he pushes the smaller cock into my ass. Like he promised, it slides in so easily, lubricated by our combined juices. The feeling of being filled in both holes is overwhelming. I've done this a thousand times with my toys, but none of them felt like this inside me, hot and alive and wanting .

Zed knows what I need. Or maybe what he needs is exactly what I want. Either way, he fucks me hard and fast, his cocks sliding in and out of me in tandem. My pussy clenches around his lower shaft, my ass tightening around the upper one. It's a feeling of fullness that's unlike anything I've ever experienced, like he's claiming every part of me.

I'm so wet with my own arousal and his cum that every stroke makes a loud, sloppy

sound. I'd be embarrassed if Zed's low grunts of satisfaction didn't underpin it, making the noise filthy and delicious instead of silly.

His tail coils around my waist, pulling me back against him. The new posture changes our pace from deep thrusts to a slow grind. As he guides my movements, his claws dig into my skin just enough to remind me that he's in charge. The pressure on my G-spot is incredible, and I can already feel the beginnings of another orgasm building deep within me.

I don't want it to end, so I slow down a little, gliding on his cock instead of slamming down. His scales are warm and smooth against my back, his muscles rippling with every movement. I bend my neck to watch where his cock stretches me open, my pussy split by his huge girth.

He curves his body around mine to say in my ear, "Look at you, taking two dragon cocks like it's nothing."

"It's everything," I pant back, digging my heels into the sofa to bounce on him again. He feels so good. It's everything I've always wanted. Still feels like a dream.

The new movement makes his breath whoosh out against my neck, and I can feel his heart racing in time with my own. His teeth graze my earlobe, and I shiver with excitement.

"Feel what you do to me?" Something thick and hot swells in my pussy. It's his knot. He's going to tie us together, to seal our fated bond. "Last chance to back out. Is this what you want?"

I turn my head to look into his eyes. and I know he's going to claim me completely. I'm ready. I'm so ready. "It's all I want. You're all I want."

The knot swells even more, forcing my legs apart slightly, and I feel it lock into place, expanding to the point that it can't slide back out. Then he's coming, filling me with his hot cum, making my stomach bulge even more. His tail slips down from my waist to rub against my clit, and I come with him, my body convulsing in pleasure as we reach our peak together.

My body clutches around him, and the knot swells even more. I know without trying that there's no way for us to separate. We'll be stuck like this for a while, my pussy clenched around his knot. I milk him for every drop he's got, while the end of his tail tortures my poor, oversensitive clit until I beg him to stop.

Zed nuzzles his snout in my hair and strokes his hands down my arms. "No bratty comments now, huh?"

"Hm-mm." If there was any brat in me to begin with, she's long gone.

Cari

I feel Zed smile against the top of my head as he pulls a throw over us and bands his arms around me.

We stay like that, slouched back on the sofa, breathing ragged, hearts pounding and sweat cooling. I think I even doze off at some point. I wake up when his tail uncoils and he eases out of me, catching the gush of warm liquid that pours out of me with his discarded T-shirt.

“Stay,” he tells me, pulling the covers up over me. “I’ll bring you something to clean up with.”

“I love you,” I say, checking to make sure I didn’t make this all up in my head. He comes back with a warm washcloth and a glass of water. After we clean up and share the water, I ask, “Are we really mates? You aren’t pranking me or something?”

Zed drops to his knees next to the sofa. “I love you, too. Cari, you’ve had my heart since the day I first saw you and Radar in the forest. If I had a gift for you, I’d say the alokim right now. I should know what you want most in the world. It’s been long enough. The fact that I don’t is my failing. I’ll learn and do better, I promise.”

His expression is so earnest, I have to laugh. “You’re joking, right?”

He shakes his head, his jaw setting stubbornly. “I’ll find the perfect gift. I’ll get it right this time.”

I grab his face with both hands. “Ask your feral form what I want most.”

He snorts a laugh. “He thinks he just gave it to you.”

“Well, what can I say?” I shrug, giggling and blushing. “He knows his mate.”

“Fuck,” he murmurs helplessly, eyes glowing, and then he kisses me. It’s a wild devouring, half curses and half tongue. When he comes up for air, he says, “I won’t wait on the alokim, then. I see you, Cari. I feel your flame. You are known to me.”

I feel a fluttering inside me too big to be a butterfly. I think my heart might fly away, it’s so happy. I’m really his mate. We get to be together forever.

Too exhausted to move to the bedroom, we fall asleep on the couch and don’t wake up until Radar’s cold, wet nose nudges into my palm in the morning, letting me know it’s time for his breakfast.

“I’ll feed him,” Zed says, scooting his arm out from under me. “I need to go get you a gift, anyway. I’ll pick up some breakfast for us while I’m out.”

“You don’t have to,” I protest, laughing and hanging onto him so he can’t leave. “I’d rather stay in bed with you.”

“Yesss,” he hisses with feral intensity, stealing another kiss from me. “All day and all night, too. But when my mother asks what I got you for your alokoi gift, I refuse to tell her that I fucked you in the ass.”

I burst out laughing at the idea. “Okay, okay, probably not a good plan,” I concede. “You have one hour to procure breakfast and a gift. That’s it. And for the record, breakfast is the important part. I don’t care if all you get me for a gift is the free breath mints from the restaurant.”

“You got it. One hour. Not a second longer.” He kisses me again before feeding Radar and rushing out.

I flop back on the sofa cushions, luxuriating in their soft embrace as I replay our evening, how thoroughly he filled me up and worked me over. I hope he enjoyed it half as much as I did.

My phone buzzes on a side table, and Radar lifts one ear. How he heard that quiet notification but didn’t wake up while I was getting absolutely railed by a dragon last night, I have no idea, but it makes me smile. My little old man’s still got it.

I sit up and grab the phone in case it’s a message from Zed asking about breakfast, but it’s a text from a number I don’t recognize. A little cold bubble of fear forms in my belly. I get that feeling every time an unknown number messages or calls me, because it could always be him. My stalker.

I shouldn’t let it scare me. I haven’t heard from him in years. It’s probably just random spam or a package delivery notification. I tap on it and the message opens.

Unknown Number

Thought you should see this.

A second message comes through. It looks like a link to a spreadsheet. I don’t click on it. I’m not an idiot. It’s obviously some scammer trying to trick me into downloading something.

Then a third message vibrates my hand.

Unknown Number

Zed isn't who you think he is.

The bubble in my stomach bursts, flooding me with adrenaline. This isn't a scammer.
This is...something else. I just don't know what.

Maybe I am stupid, because I open the spreadsheet link.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Zed

I know exactly what I'm going to get her. I noticed it in the vintage shop when I was there getting my tux.

Thankfully, the place is open on Sundays, and the item's still there: a cute gold bracelet with a little dachshund charm on it. It might not be one of the things Cari wants most in the world, but I know how important Radar is to her. Plus, he's the reason we met, so the bracelet symbolizes our connection from day one.

"The eyes are real diamond chips," the shop owner tells me as she wraps it up. Fitting, since Radar's eyes are special, too.

A text message comes in just as I'm checking out. I swipe it open absentmindedly, expecting something about work from Gabe. But it's from Cari.

Cari

I saw the spreadsheet. It's over. Don't contact me again.

I drop the bag with the bracelet in it on the floor of the shop. My chest hollows, the emptiness inside taking over, swallowing my thoughts. My ability to breathe.

My worst fear is happening. Now that Cari knows the full extent of my stalking, she wants nothing to do with me. My mate doesn't want to see me again. My feral form is so devastated, he can't even roar his disapproval. He howls, mourning for her so loudly my ears ring.

“Everything okay?” When I don’t answer immediately, the trolless steps around the counter and picks up the bag, pressing it into my hand. “Whatever it is, life will go on. You’ll see.”

I thank her for her platitudes and swallow the bile rising in my throat. Life will never go on from Cari. She is my life. I think our fifteen years apart proved that.

I stumble out of the shop onto the San Drogo boardwalk. Every instinct in me, every thought and impulse, says I should go to her. But she doesn’t want me there. She doesn’t ever want me there, not because of how she feels about me now, but because of what I did to cope while we were apart.

It’s not fair! She was never supposed to see that. The spreadsheet was only a tool to learn everything I could about her, so I could be a good mate to her. Blindly, I pull out my phone and text her back.

Zed

I love you, Cari. Please, give me a chance to explain everything. I won’t bother you again if you’ll hear me out.

The message turns red. Undeliverable , it reads beneath it.

She blocked me.

Fuck.

I lean against the rail of the boardwalk and stare out at the ocean. Tiny flecks of white dot the horizon, boats sailing back into the harbor. Or maybe they’re not coming back. Maybe they’re sailing away.

What am I going to do?

My feral form already has some ideas, and they involve killing whoever showed her the spreadsheet. Not a bad idea, now that I think about it. There's only one person who could have done it, who has the technical expertise and wants me out of the way. A certain sulfur-stinking demon with good hair and a bad attitude.

He's easy to find. Of course, he lives in the penthouse of the building with his name in fifteen-foot letters across the front.

"I need to see Tristan," I tell the doorman at the desk. He asks my name, and I give it.

He shakes his head. "If you're not on Mr. Vance's list, I can't let you in."

"Tell him it's about Cari," I urge. "Please. It's urgent."

He sighs heavily like I'm wasting his time but makes the call. He lifts his eyebrows in surprise at whatever he hears on the other end of the line. He hangs up, shrugging. "Go on up."

The private penthouse elevator takes me to a luxe marble foyer with only one door. When Tristan answers my knock, I punch him in the face. Hard.

It knocks the glamour right off him. His slobbering, purple form stares at me in shock as I push past him into the penthouse.

"What was that for?" he shrieks in helltones before gathering himself and resuming his polished, human appearance. His glamour probably won't even bruise.

"For ruining my life," I roar back. "What kind of vindictive bullshit was that?"

“Stop shouting, you’re scaring Impy.” Tristan picks something up from the curved sofa, cradling it in his arms. It’s a fluffy, slightly grizzled-looking gray cat that yawns and blinks blearily at me with yellow eyes. “What’s going on with Cari? Is she all right?”

“No, she’s not! You ripped her heart out, and for what? I mated her. Did you stop to think for one second how that would affect us both for the rest of our lives when you decided to set off a bomb in the middle of our relationship?!” Smoke leaks from my nostrils as I pace back and forth in the long, open loft that’s big enough to house a whole hive of dragons. What a waste for one person.

“Settle down. You’re going to set off the sprinklers,” he says, plopping down on the sofa with his cat still in his arms. He pets her, and the cat leans into his hand, purring. He’s smart, that’s for sure. If he wasn’t holding her, I’d punch him again.

“ Why? ” I rage at him, smacking my fist into my palm instead. “Why’d you do it? Are you still pissed that I told her you’re a demon? Because she didn’t even care about that, if I remember right. She was ready to feel sorry for you. If she cut you off as a friend, it’s because you fucked up, not me. It was cruel to send her that spreadsheet. Low, even for you.”

“What are you talking about?” Tristan frowns from his place on the couch. “I didn’t send Cari anything. I haven’t spoken with her since the gala. I adopted a new cat yesterday, and I’ve been busy getting him settled in. I don’t know anything about any spreadsheet.”

He seems genuinely bewildered, but demons are great liars, so I don’t believe him for a second. “Nobody else has the resources to hack my account. Nobody else wants to keep me away from Cari. Only you.”

The instant the words are out of my mouth, I realize they’re not true. There is someone

else who fits both those descriptions. Someone who's always tried to keep Cari out of my life. Even back when he camped out with me all night in the woods so I could watch her bedroom window, he was also there, telling me she wasn't worth it.

Someone who warned me not to visit her after the restraining order expired.

Someone who told me not to message her online.

Someone who lied that she was married so I wouldn't contact her.

Someone who suddenly showed up in town once I had another shot with her.

Someone who told me fewer than twelve hours ago to forget her, even though she's my fated mate.

Someone who literally has access to my unlocked laptop. He didn't need to hack my account to send her my spreadsheet.

Fuck . It was Gabe. It's been Gabe all along. He didn't tag along with me back in high school because he wanted to hang out with me. He was stalking her, too.

"What?" Tristan asks. "What is it?"

"I think Cari's in danger," I say tightly.

I quickly explain everything to him: How my best friend and business partner is probably Cari's longtime stalker. How I left her alone in her cottage when his hotel room is only a short walk away. How she texted me that she didn't want to see me ever again after making me promise not to stay away more than an hour.

Tristan's expression goes grim at last part. "I don't think she sent you that text

message. I think he did.”

“Even if it was her,” I say bleakly. “I’m not giving up. Do these open?” I motion to the floor-to-ceiling, plate-glass windows that line the wall.

“Why?”

“I’m going to fly.”

“For Seventh Circle’s sake, don’t shift in here,” he mutters, rising and gently placing his cat on a velvet sofa cushion. “I’ll take you to the roof.”

Of course, the rich bastard has a helipad up there, with a sleek, silver helicopter parked on it. He motions to it. “Get in. I’m flying, not you. I don’t trust you to carry me.”

I snort at his cowardice. “And I should trust you ? Do you even have a pilot’s license?” But I’m already getting into the passenger side, oddly grateful that he’s coming with me considering I just socked him in the jaw.

He tosses me a headset and we both buckle into our harnesses.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask as we lift off.

“She’s my friend,” he says through the headset as he deftly guides the helicopter above the downtown buildings. “I don’t want her mate getting arrested.”

He radios the police on our way and gives them the address. We land in the park in two minutes flat and abandon the helicopter as soon as we can rip our seatbelts open, both sprinting toward Cari’s cottage. On the porch, I swear I can smell Gabe inside. He’s here. I know it.

I'm not waiting for the cops to show up. Not when every minute counts.

"Should I knock first or just knock it down?" I ask Tristan.

"Dragons." He rolls his eyes. "Stand back."

I barely dodge aside in time before he aims a bolt of hellfire at the lock, melting it without singeing the painted wood around it. He turns the knob, and the door falls open easily. "After you."

I barrel inside, Tristan on my heels. I'm expecting the worse, but I'm still shocked when I find them. Cari is tied up in a kitchen chair, a collar around her neck. The end of the leash attached to it is in Gabe's hand. Torn-up sunflowers litter the floor around them.

When I start to move toward them, Gabe yanks the leash, making her cough. He has a sick look of satisfaction when he sees me skid to a halt, fearful of him inflicting any more pain on her.

"She doesn't want you anymore, bro," he says. "We're finally together."

"That's not —" Cari starts, but he jerks the leash again, cutting her off.

"Don't hurt her," I scrape out.

He nods. "Turn around and walk out. Take your friend, too. Then we all get what we want. She's happy, you're happy, I'm happy."

I hear a dog bark, high and sharp, from the back of the house. It draws Gabe's attention. He frowns, his movements becoming more agitated. Cari's blue eyes plead silently with me to get Radar out of this situation, but I can't leave her even for a

second.

“Go,” I murmur to Tristan. “Grab Radar on the way. I think he’s in the bedroom.” To Cari, I add, “Sorry about your kitchen.”

Then I shift.

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Cari

Zed bursts out of his skin like a volcano erupting, terrifying and magnificent. His enormous left elbow dents my refrigerator and his right one knocks all the dishes out of the cabinet. They smash onto the floor, sending shards of ceramics flying. The angry roar he lets out blows my hair back.

And then he swallows Gabe. There's the tiniest tug on the leash before his teeth sever it, and then Gabe is just...gone.

The enormous dragon that is my mate gives me the tiniest, apologetic shrug of his shoulders and then lumbers out of the cottage through the sliding glass door, destroying it completely.

Outside, I can hear sirens approaching, and relief settles over me.

Everything's going to be all right.

I knew the second I looked at the spreadsheet link that it wasn't Zed's. Sure, it had a ton of stuff in it that only he knew. Things we talked about, the flavor profile of my pussy. But it had other stuff, too. The voicemails, the things left on my porch. The panties stolen, the friends harassed. Things Zed would never do. Boundaries he'd never cross.

It's my stalker, trying to keep me away from the one person who will protect me. So I texted back before blocking the number.

Cari

FUCK OFF

But then came the knock at the door a few minutes later. As soon as I looked out the window and saw the brown Sasquatch holding a sunflower on my doorstep, my heart stopped. It was him. His fur perfectly matched the lock of hair he'd sent me. And the sunflower perfectly matched the bouquet I'd thought was from Zed.

"Remember me?" he called through the door. "Gabe? Zed's friend from high school?"

I remembered him. We never talked much, but he was always there, hanging around in the background. Watching us. Radar must have sensed the bolt of fear that ran through me, because he started barking like crazy.

Quickly, I dialed the local police, who are well aware of my history. Over Radar's loud barks, I explained that my stalker was at my front door, and they promised to send a squad car.

"I just want to talk," he called through the door, banging on it. "I need to clear things up."

"I called the cops," I yelled back. Outside, it went silent, which was almost creepier than before. And then I heard the noise. The beep of the code being entered. I forgot to change it.

And then the front door opened.

Radar heard it, dashing toward the intruder before I could stop him. His little whimper when Gabe caught him destroyed my soul. I'd never let anyone hurt him if I

could help it.

That's how I found myself texting Zed those heartbreaking words. Calling the cops to tell them I was mistaken and to cancel the squad car. Letting Gabe tie me up and put a leash on me. Listening to his confessions of love, his twisted dreams for our life together in the forest. All so he'd let Radar live.

It worked. It worked long enough for Zed to come for me like I knew he would. A stupid text wouldn't keep him away. I just didn't know he was going to eat Gabe when he finally showed up.

I'm not sorry he did it, but I hope he doesn't get in trouble for it.

Long minutes later, a couple of police officers come inside to untie me and clear the house. One takes my statement, nodding sympathetically as I describe what happened, glossing over the part where my mate straight-up swallowed him.

"He, uh, disappeared."

"Mhm." The cop jots a few notes and radios for a paramedic to join us, who checks me out and pronounces all my bumps and bruises superficial, which I could've told him.

"The perpetrator has been taken into custody," the officer assures me after I sign his form. "You won't have to worry about him anymore."

I blink at him. "The Sasquatch?" The one that Zed swallowed whole? I don't ask.

"The dragon coughed him up like a hairball," the cop chuckles. "He'll have to pay a fine for shifting inside San Drogo city limits, but I'm not sorry he did."

“I’ll cover the fine,” Tristan says from behind the cop. He has Radar in his arms. He passes the dog to me with a soft expression. “And the kitchen repairs.”

“Thank you,” I tell him sincerely, both for the offer to pay and for taking good care of my little old man while everything was going down.

He shrugs, looking as unruffled as always. “Anything for a friend. Of course, if you wanted to demonstrate the depth of your gratitude, you could agree to take my cats as patients again.”

I grin at him. Of course, he had an ulterior motive for helping out. “You adopted another one after all?”

He nods. “Name’s Goblin. He’s diabetic, but his condition is well-managed already. I don’t think we’ll be in your office too much.” He says it like I’ve already taken him back as a client. I have to admit, I’m feeling pretty forgiving right now.

“Zed and I are mates. That’s not going to change no matter how many cute cats you adopt,” I warn him, just to be sure he doesn’t get the wrong idea.

He ducks his handsome head. “I know. And I know it was wrong to use Impy to get close to you. I was desperate, though. I’ve never had so much trouble seducing someone. The funny thing is that instead of getting you to fall in love with me, I fell in love with Impy along the way. There are no cats in Hell, you know. They all go to heaven.” Tristan looks very put out by this fact.

“Guess you’re stuck in San Drogo with us,” I tell him, nuzzling Radar’s fur. I add, “I’ll let Cynthia know to put you back on the books.”

“You beautiful, merciful creature! I could kiss you,” Tristan exclaims.

“Better not,” Zed growls behind him. He’s a mess. Hair tangled around his horns, clothes hanging off him in shreds, a silver emergency blanket wrapped around his hips like a space-sarong. He’s the most handsome guy I’ve ever seen.

I fling myself (and Radar) into his arms.

“Sunflower,” he murmurs, lifting us up. Overwhelmed by the strong, protective circle of his hug, I’m barely conscious of Tristan and the cops filtering out, leaving us alone. “I’m so sorry for wrecking your kitchen. Shit, I have so many things to apologize for. What you saw in that spreadsheet —”

I’m so happy to be back in his arms, I don’t care about anything else. “I know it was all lies. I knew instantly when I saw it that it wasn’t you.”

“It was me,” he says quietly as he carries me to the sofa that will always be the place where he made me his mate. “I did all those things. I’m no better than Gabe. And I completely understand if you need some time to process everything that’s happened. I swear, I’ll still be here when you’re done working it out. We can do therapy together or apart or both. Just please, don’t say it’s over.”

Radar wriggles out of my lap and hops down from the sofa with Zed’s help, trundling on his short little legs to his bed in the corner. I guess he’s worn out, too.

“First of all, I don’t think you saw the same spreadsheet I saw. It had all kinds of stuff on there that you definitely didn’t do. Secondly, the fact that you would give me time to process and suggest therapy is exactly why you’re better than Gabe. You respect my boundaries, and you care about how I’m feeling. Third, you’re my mate, so you’re allowed to stalk me. You’re the only one allowed.”

Zed chuckles, giving me an extra squeeze. “That’s what my feral form says.”

“He and I get along.”

He growls playfully under his breath. “Don’t give him any ideas, Cari. He’s already way too pleased with himself today.”

“He should be. He saved me. You both did. You’re always in the right place at the right time.” My heart races a little, thinking of what might have happened if he hadn’t shown up.

“Tristan helped, too,” Zed says grudgingly. “He’s not a bad guy for a demon. Offered to take Gabe on a one-way trip downstairs.”

“Should’ve let him,” I joke. “Or you should’ve chewed more before you swallowed him.”

Zed cracks a wide, sharp-toothed grin. “My bloodthirsty little mate. If the justice system doesn’t take care of Gabe, we’ll let Tristan do the dirty work. I have no interest in eating him. I think I still have Sasquatch fur stuck in my teeth.”

“Eww,” I groan. “That’s almost enough to do away with my appetite.”

“That’s right, I need to feed you, don’t I? My sunflower must be starving.”

I nod. “It’s been way more than an hour since you went out for food. It’s almost lunchtime.”

“Sushi picnic?” he suggests. “Or we could get Korean barbecue.”

I debate for a split-second before deciding. “Both! This is a celebration.”

His clothes are destroyed, so he squeezes into my baggiest sweats and biggest T-shirt.

They look like a crop-top and skin-tight leggings on him, but it's enough to get us across the park to the food carts. Zed, Radar, and I order a takeaway feast that we spread out on a blanket in the grass.

After we stuff ourselves, we watch the clouds drift across the blue expanse above. I lie on top of Zed like a mattress and Radar snuggles into the curve of his tail. It's peaceful and warm and perfect.

We still have a lot of things to figure out, like where to live and what Zed's going to do about his business, but I know we'll make a good life together...even if it's not exactly like typical dragon couples.

"Will you take me flying some time?" I ask, old insecurities pricking at me as I stare up at the sky.

"Any time. You'd trust me to carry you?" The softness in his voice tells me everything I need to know. That I'm the mate he's been dreaming of, the same way I've always only wanted him. That he wants everything with me, always.

I nod. "I know you'd never let me go."

He fishes in the pocket of his borrowed sweatpants, extracting something that he passes to me. It's a small box tied up with a red ribbon. "Your alokoi gift," he explains. "Thankfully I didn't swallow it this morning."

I giggle as I unwrap it, knowing what the real gift was. Inside the box is a delicate chain bracelet with a gold dachshund charm. I gasp when I notice the tiny, glittering gems that make up its eyes. "This is so perfect! I love it."

"I thought it was appropriate. Radar is kind of our matchmaker, isn't he?" Zed grins as he helps me fasten it around my wrist.

“And now we’re a family.” I turn my face up to his, squinting into the sun. “Wait, what do you want most? I should get you an alokoi gift, too.”

His breath whooshes out in a puff of smoke. “You’ve already given it to me. Your forgiveness. Your trust in me even though I’ve been a neglectful mate. I don’t want anything else from you.”

“ Nothing? ” I tease, reaching to squeeze his cock through his borrowed pants.

He growls and rolls us over so he’s on top of me, though he’s careful not to disturb Radar’s nap. “I think you’ve given that to me, too, alokoi. Although I’m happy to receive that gift again. And again, and again...”

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Zed's Feral Form

M ate.

She's so small and soft in my claws. A tiny weight. I hoist her to my back so she can straddle my spine right above my wings. I can feel the heat of her folds through my scales, which I enjoy very much. I would like to do a lot of things to those folds and the holes they hide.

You're too big. Don't forget you could hurt her, Zed says inside me. Words, words, words. He always has words.

I would never hurt her. I would bite off my own tail before I'd do that.

I prefer to carry my mate, but today I must carry her animal friend. Radar is my friend, too. We both enjoy the same things: fresh meat, interesting smells, and her .

He climbs into my hands with only a little coaxing. He's not afraid to fly with me. He likes the wind flapping his ears.

I push off from the ground, stretching my wings to lift us high and then higher above the forest. My mate's little limbs squeeze my neck as I wheel to give her a good view of the trees, the river, and the ocean beyond. She likes to see everything, and so I try and show her the whole world.

Stop showing off , Zed complains. She's getting tired.

Words, words. My mate loves it. I can feel her heart jump and zip with excitement. Sometimes I wonder if she has a dragon inside that just can't come out. Today, maybe I'll find out.

I turn toward the sea, heading for the cliffs I scouted earlier. Above a small bay, there's a cliffside cave big enough for a dragon's den. I swept it out with my tail to make it ready for her and filled it with nesting material. My mate is so soft, she needs a soft nest. It took a lot of material because it's big enough for me, too.

I made another, smaller nest for our animal friend. He is old and requires a lot of rest. My mate and I will not be resting in our nest, though.

Zed is talking words again, but I'm not listening. I focus on landing gently on the ledge that leads to the cave. My mate slides down off my back, gasping when she sees what I've prepared for us.

"This is amazing! Where did you get all this?" she asks me.

Yeah, where? Zed demands. I know you didn't pay for it. Did you steal it? Are we going to get in legal trouble because you turn into a klepto every time you see a pillow or blanket?

See what I mean about words? He never stops. That's why I have to do things while he's sleeping sometimes.

I show my mate the little animal nest and put our friend in it. She looks happy at first, but then she frowns, motioning to the ledge behind us.

"He could wander out and fall off," she explains, her delicious scent souring a little.

I locate some of the boulders I moved to the back of the cave and place them around his nest. His legs are short and he can't fly, so he'll be safe behind a stone wall. My

mate beams her approval at me, showing her cute little teeth.

I scoop her up, lick her face, and take her to our nest. She laughs when I throw her into the pile of pillows in the center, so I pick her up and do it again. She's still giggling when I slice off the fabric scraps that cover her curvy little body. I lick the soft, jiggly parts that I reveal, and she makes some noises that harden my cocks.

Let me out now, Zed says, storming around in there. This is my part.

I ignore him, because this is definitely my part still.

My tongue dips between my mate's thighs, where her scent is the strongest, and she moans louder than she did before. That must be the right place. I concentrate there and feel her grow wetter, her taste more intense.

My tongue worms deep into her soft, muscular channel, licking up as much of her delicious wetness as it can until she grabs my horns. Her legs shake around my head, and she's squirming so much that I have to hold her down.

I'm not sure if she's trying to get away or trying to get closer, but I keep going because she's still making the good sounds. The ones that have my cocks drooling all over the nest.

Zed yells something at me about my cocks, but I can't hear him over the blood pounding in my ears. My tongue reaches deep inside her, and I swear I can taste her shy dragon in there. If I can just coax it out...

A rush of liquid pours out of her, even more delicious and salty-sweet than before. I have to take her whole pelvis in my mouth to catch it all.

"Zed," she whimpers, eyes squeezed shut and legs around my ears, but I know she means me. He and I are the same dragon, even if he doesn't always remember that. I

know and my mate knows, and eventually he will figure it out.

I clamp my jaws around her, mindful of my teeth, and suck her tender flesh, comforting her with slow, soft licks until I feel her swell with fresh arousal. It's like having fruit ripen right in my mouth.

Juicy and sweet. So delicate and tasty.

Don't you dare bite her, Zed rails, which is pretty funny coming from him since he bites her all the time.

She melts on my tongue when her pleasure peaks this time, going totally limp, happy, salty tears leaking from the corners of her eyes.

"Oh my god, I love you," she whimpers, jolting every time my tongue teases into her. "I love you so much." She means me, him, us.

Our mate , Zed says. He finally gets it.

Mate , I agree. Our favorite word. Our reason for being. Our everything, forever.